ARENAS

ANALYSIS OF AND RESPONSES
TO EXTREMIST NARRATIVES

HISTORICAL ROOTS
OF EXTREMIST NARRATIVES
IN EUROPE

Steven Forti (ed.)

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The **ARENAS project** looks at extremist narratives that affect political and social life in Europe. It examines the nature of these narratives and seeks to understand the discourses they impact, particularly about science, gender and the nation. By understanding how these narratives work, ARENAS will empower people to resist them. To foster a spirit of people living together in harmony across Europe, policy recommendations will be made as to how to prevent such narratives from taking hold in the future.

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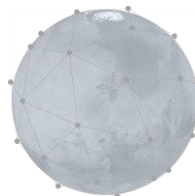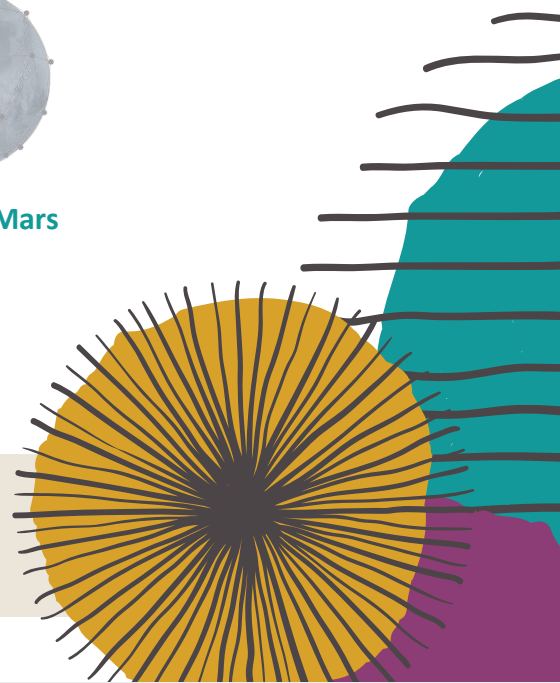**Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf**

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The spread of extremist narratives is a real threat to democratic values and the long-term survival of liberal democracies.

Extremist narratives have always existed, however, in the last two decades, their diffusion has increased considerably due to the Internet and social networks which have allowed their rapid viralisation, amplifying their impact on our societies. All this happened in a context of polycrisis (economic-financial crisis of 2008-2010; Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2022; climate change; war in Ukraine and Gaza, etc.) in which feelings such as distrust towards institutions and resentment towards the elites are shared by a significant part of the European population.
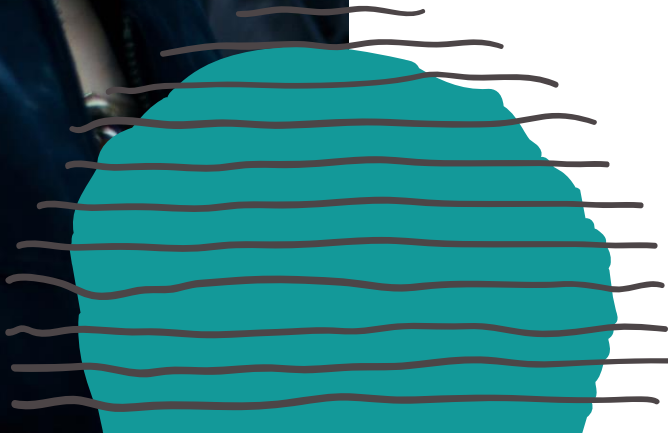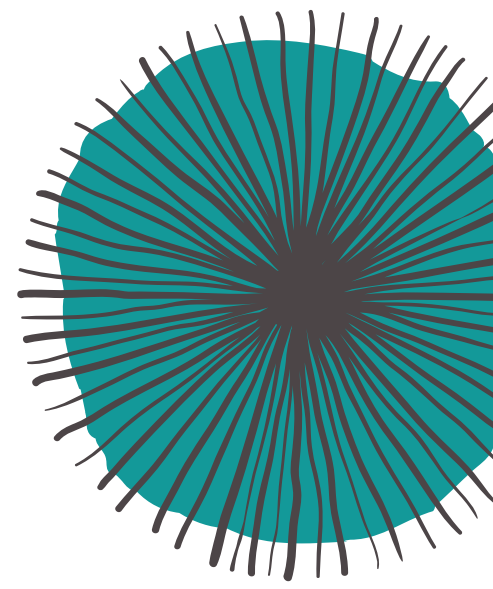
There are many political and social actors spreading extremist narratives in Europe. Over the last two decades, one of the main ones is the far right which has significantly increased its votes in all European countries since the beginning of the 21st century, becoming a leading political player. In the 2024 European elections, far-right parties won more than 20% of the seats in the European Parliament. Furthermore, since 2010, the far right has come to government in several countries (Hungary, Poland, Italy, Finland, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Croatia, etc.), sometimes alone, other times in coalition with right-wing or also liberal parties.

This report is the result of **the study of the historical roots of extremist narratives in Europe and their evolution and transformation over the last century**. The case studies that we analysed between the end of the 19th century and the present day are Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Finland, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia.

This report is the result of **task 3.2 of the ARENAS project**. It is the first step in being able to analyse both the circulation of extremist narratives currently in the political and media space, as well as their impact on European society. This will ultimately allow us to develop and propose effective responses and concrete solutions and tools to stakeholders with the aim of curbing the spread of extremist narratives and promoting constructive dialogue.

The **objectives** of this report are:
- identify the historical roots of extremist narratives in Europe;
- show their evolution, transformation and updating both in different national contexts as well as at a continental level;
- highlight the similarities existing at a European level;
- offer a complete picture of the main extremist narratives currently circulating in Europe.

Starting from these objectives, three working groups were formed: **Nation, Gender, and Science**. The following report is therefore divided into these three sections. Added to this is a brief methodological introduction and a conclusion with policy recommendations.

02

INTRODUCTION
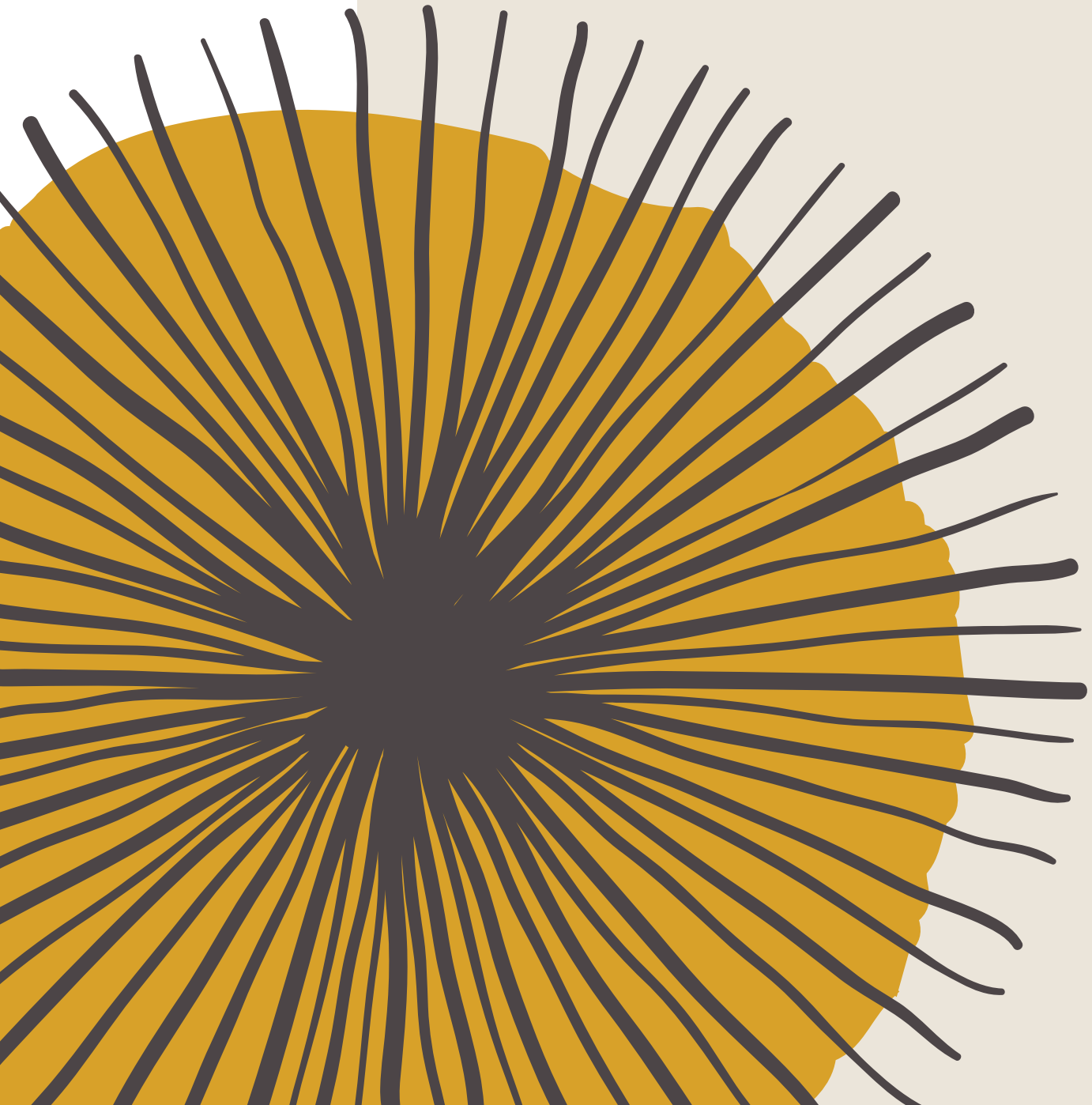
What is an extremist narrative

To identify extremist narratives and their historical roots in Europe, we based our research on the **operational definition** developed by Work Package 2 of the ARENAS project. The definition is as follows:

Extremist narratives are extremist in the sense that they clearly distinguish between a (morally and ethically) superior in-group that is perceived as legitimate and an out-group that is framed as both inferior and dangerous, and against whom the in-group has to defend their interests at all costs, including by means of hostile actions and not accepting any alternative views.

Extremist narratives are narratives that often rely on "storytelling" in the sense of evoking a structured sequence of events caused or experienced by actors and involving a construal of Us/Them dichotomies, to emotionally anchor and reinforce worldviews, but also to propagate and normalise ideologies.

So, it is composed of narratological aspects and extremist features.

Far right parties and movements as entry point

As several scholars have highlighted (Camus and Lebourg, 2017; Mudde, 2019; Forti, 2021), the far right has become normalized and demarginalized in the last two decades: from a marginal political actor it has become a central political actor. With the concept of far-right, we consider both political formations defined as radical right – which do not reject democracy per se, but the liberal model of democracy – and extreme right political formations - which reject democracy per se (Mudde, 2019). In several countries, far-right parties have obtained significant electoral support and, above all, from 2010 onwards they reached the government.

The main ideological characteristics of the far right are **nativism** – that is, the combination of nationalism and xenophobia –, **authoritarianism and populism**. One of the main themes used in the propaganda by far-right parties and movements is the rejection of immigration and minority rights, which is connected to what has been defined as **cultural backlash**. That is a reaction against cultural changes that threaten the worldview of once-predominant sectors of the population (Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

For this reason, and for the threat that their ideology, and the narratives they spread, represent for a liberal and multicultural society, founded on respect for human rights, the Rule of Law, gender equality and minority rights, we decided to consider **far-right parties and movements** as the entry point of our research.

This obviously does not mean that there are no extremist narratives that are linked to other ideologies or political positioning, for example on the left. Our choice essentially has two motivations. Firstly, as explained above, the far right is now **a central political actor in Europe** (and beyond): these are no longer marginal and irrelevant parties or movements, but political forces that govern several countries and decisively influence both the public policies and the worldview of European citizens. Whereas in the case of the far left, we cannot say the same: neither does it have broad electoral support, nor does it have the capacity to influence, like the far right, the debates in many countries or to change the *Weltanschauung* of millions and millions of citizens. What is more, as pointed out, the threat of the far right is much greater for liberal values. Secondly, our choice also depends on purely scientific reasons: a study that sets out to analyse the historical evolution and circulation of extremist narratives in different European countries is practically impossible unless the field of study is reduced.

The difficulties of recognising an extremist narrative nowadays

Simultaneously to the demarginalization of far-right parties, in recent years also extremist narratives have progressively normalised, becoming almost mainstream. They have been accepted by important sectors of the European population and by mainstream political parties, mainly a majority part of the right, but in some cases also by liberal and some leftist parties.

In this sense, it is necessary to underline how it is often difficult to draw clear red lines between what is extremist and what is considered mainstream, especially in some countries. For example, in countries where the far right governs or has governed for several years, such as Hungary and Poland, but also Italy, extremist narratives are now mainstream and are therefore not considered extremist by part of the population. On the contrary, what in countries such as Hungary is considered extremist are the narratives in defence of human rights and minorities, accused of being "globalists" and a threat to their nation.
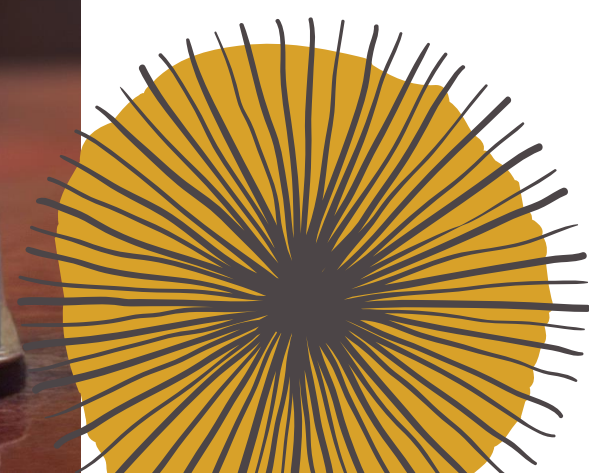
The recycling nature of extremist narratives

To recognize and detect extremist narratives over such a large period - over a century - we relied on **rhizome theory** which allows us to understand how narratives continually evolve and recycle (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

Recycling, understood in its broadest sense, not only refers to the reuse of materials to preserve the environment but also to how ideas, narratives, and historical myths are reused and adapted over time. This adaptation of concepts is crucial to understanding how extremist narratives persist and evolve, giving them remarkable social permeability. Historically, the **recycling of narratives** has played a vital role in nation-building and the definition of cultural identities. From antiquity to the present day, the metanarratives that articulate a nation's identity have been essential for constructing a shared vision of the past and the future. These metanarratives not only consolidate national identity but also prioritize themes and values, establishing what is considered fundamental and what can be secondary.

Similarly, **culture wars** are crucial in the recycling of extremist narratives. The culture wars are a conflict between social groups and the struggle for dominance of their values, beliefs, and practices. The term is commonly used to describe cultural conflicts based on values, morality, and lifestyle – with issues such as abortion, homosexuality, pornography, multiculturalism, etc. – being described as the major political cleavage (Hunter, 1991).

The struggle for control of these narratives is key for tracing the hegemony of the discourse on the historical formations of nations. In this sense, each nation has created its own history and legends to define what it means to be a "true" Spaniard, French, Italian, Hungarian, etc. These stories, though diverse, share common structures and similar objectives, showing a tendency to recycle concepts and values to maintain the cohesion and legitimacy of the group in question.

In this sense, the **rhizome theory** is useful for understanding how narratives evolve and adapt to different historical contexts. According to this theory, narratives do not follow a linear hierarchical structure but expand and connect in a non-linear way, like the roots of a rhizome. This flexibility allows narratives to adapt to changing historical and social contexts, maintaining their relevance and effectiveness. The recycling nature of extremist narratives, as well as their ability to reinvent themselves and circulate through time and space, are key elements in understanding their strength and social permeability. These narratives do not disappear; they transform and resurface, always maintaining the core of their fundamental ideas.

03

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF EXTREMIST NARRATIVES: NATION

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF EXTREMIST NARRATIVES: NATION
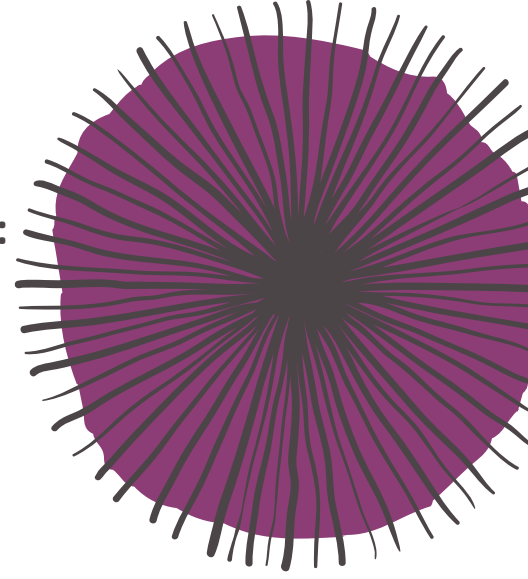
Executive summary

The topic of nation is one of key importance when trying to understand the construction of a collective national identity with a potentia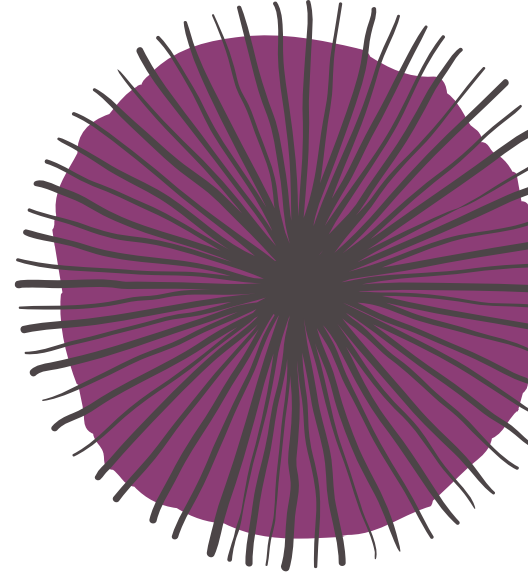l for political hegemony. Through narratives and metanarratives, disseminated by potentially extremist political, social and civil agents, specific **visions of how the nation should be** are introduced into the mainstream public. These visions, though, are not new to our societies, since it is possible to track the origins of these narratives to the 19th and 20th centuries, meaning that most of them are recycled and reused from the past, adapting them to the contemporary era and idiosyncrasies, but maintaining the core and underlying ideologies of each one.

Without forgetting about specific country particularities, extremist narratives have common topics and structures that help create relevant transnational ties. One of the most prominent and common structures across countries is the **glorification of the past of the nation**, followed by the description of a **decadent and hostile present**, and the possibility or **promise of a hopeful and better future** for those considered part of the nation. It is of great importance to mention that the narratives that will be referred to in this section of the report are extremely exclusive and intolerant of the out-group, and it is possible to identify **xenophobic, misogynistic, and extremely chauvinistic visions of the nation**. To achieve this objective of glorifying the past, politically motivated historical revisionism proves to be a crucial element.

Politically motivated historical revisionism works not only for the glorification of the past but also to create a shared idea of what means to be part of the nation on a cultural level. From this perspective, therefore, it is not enough to be born in a specific country to be considered part of it, you also need to fit in with a strict cultural standard. In this sense, it is possible to describe **ethnonationalism** and nativism as key underlying ideologies within most extremist narratives related to the national topic. Both ideologies, at the same time, define clear antagonists and enemies of the nation which are deemed as existential threats. It is especially relevant to mention communism as the great historical enemy of the Western nations and culture, alongside Islam and Muslim migrants. Anti-communism, therefore, is understood as a fight, not only at the economic level but also at the cultural level in what is defined as cultural Marxism that represents woke culture.
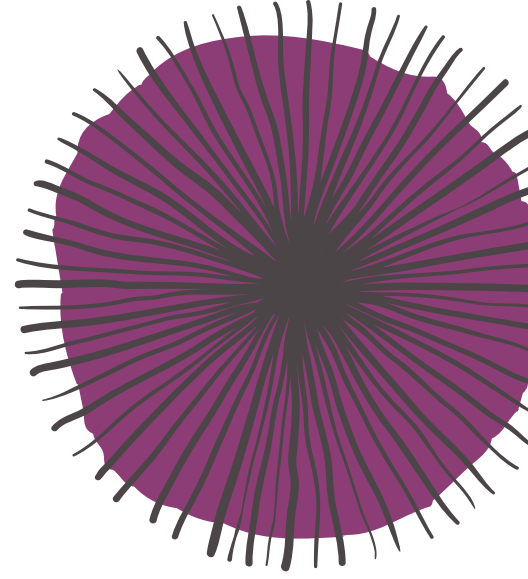
Introduction

The recycling nature of extremist narratives, as well as their ability to reinvent themselves and circulate through time and space, are key elements in understanding their strength and social permeability. These narratives do not disappear; they transform and resurface, always maintaining the core of their fundamental ideas. This complex and persistent phenomenon has significantly influenced the formation and evolution of national and cultural identities. The concept of the nation is central here, as extremist narratives often appeal to nationalist sentiments, redefining what it means to belong to a nation. By exploiting the notion of **national identity**, these narratives tap into deep-seated emotions and collective memories, making their messages more resonant and enduring. National identity becomes a powerful tool in their arsenal, used to draw sharp distinctions between "us" and "them," and to justify exclusionary and often aggressive policies. Much like the recycling of materials, this process involves reusing and adapting ideas and concepts to maintain their relevance and effectiveness across different historical and social contexts. The rhizome theory (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) offers a valuable perspective for understanding how these narratives expand and connect nonlinearly, allowing for their continuous adaptation and perpetuation.

In this context, we must highlight how the recycling of narratives has a **transnational dimension**, which can be seen during the interwar period of the 20th century with ideologies and regimes like those represented by Benito Mussolini, Miklós Horthy, Adolf Hitler, Philippe Pétain, or Francisco Franco. All of them exemplified how nationalist ideas were recycled and adapted in different national contexts. Today, this phenomenon continues with summits like Europa Viva 2024, an international meeting where some far-right leaders from Europe and America spread extremist narratives, or other pan-European identity movements, which reuse and adapt the extremist narratives of the past for their own contemporary purposes.

The transnational links not only strengthen nationalism within each country but also create a network of mutual support and legitimization among different movements, among which we could mention not only the different parties of the European far right, such as European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Identity and Democracy (ID) or Patriots for Europe (PfE), but also the far right transnational networks at a European and global level, with a myriad of associations, organizations, foundations and think tanks ranging from religious traditionalism to the defence of paleolibertarian policies. This transnational cooperation is a continuation of historical practices, showing that extremist narratives have been part of a broader and global discourse since the early 20th century (see Galimi and Gori, 2020). Recycling reinterprets old narratives to adapt them to the pertinent historical context, but despite being reinterpreted or recycled, they maintain the same underlying ideas. Among these ideas are ethnonationalism, anti-communism, neo-fascism, and politically motivated historical revisionism, among others.

In the following sections, we will develop the concepts and attempt to extract **traceability and relationships** that allow us to understand how extremist narratives not only persist but also adapt and recycle continuously to remain relevant and powerful in different historical and social contexts regarding the national construction.

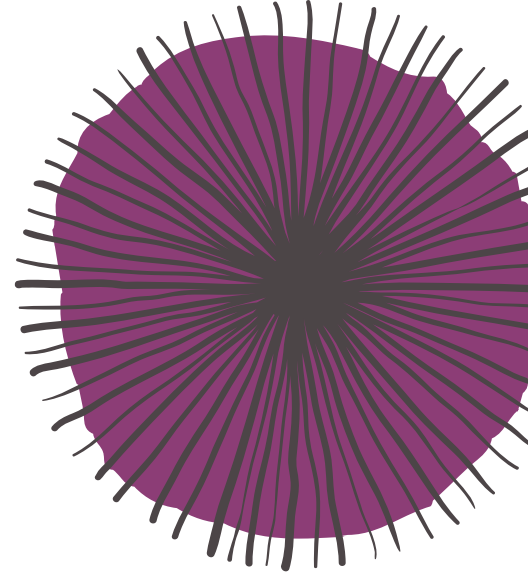# Politically motivated historical revisionism: the trivialisation of fascism

Politically motivated historical revisionism is a powerful tool used by extremist groups to rewrite the past and shape public perception of historical events. This process includes creating a narrative based on three stages: a glorious past, a decadent and hostile present, and a hopeful future. This approach not only manipulates collective memory but also **trivializes authoritarian regimes** and their crimes, promoting a distorted view of history. These revisionist narratives tend to idealize a supposed glorious past where the nation was prosperous, strong, and morally superior. This past is presented in contrast to a decadent present, characterized by the loss of values, the invasion of foreign cultures, and political corruption as threats. The solution to this decadence is presented through the support of certain self-proclaimed "patriotic" groups that promise to restore the nation's greatness. This narrative schema is used to justify the adoption of illiberal and authoritarian policies.

Through the **trivialization of fascism**, the actions of past regimes are minimized or justified. Items like "Franco did many good things" in Spain, "Mussolini did many good things" in Italy, and the "Sword and Shield" theory in France (Petain was the shield who defended France from Nazis while De Gaulle was the sword who organised the resistance) are examples of how the past is whitewashed and repressive policies are legitimized. Germany offers another example which would be the call for ending the "cult of guilt" in the official party programme of Die Heimat, former Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party of Germany, NPD).

The mentioned structure is something it is possible to see, also, in countries like Slovenia, where in line with the glorious past (Slovene independence and transition to democracy in 1991) – decadent present (perceived persistence of communism/cultural Marxism, fighting for the values of Slovene independence) – hopeful future, the partisans are blamed for Second World War atrocities and for bringing decades of communism combined with the Yugoslav state upon Slovenes, while Slovene collaborators did some good things during the Second World War (they aimed to unite the "national body" under one occupying force). This was solved with the independence conducted by the "true Slovenes" in 1991: with this concept, it is understood people who were not communists.

In this sense, the trivialisation of fascism is a crucial component of this narrative. Minimizing the crimes and abuses of fascist regimes allows extremist groups to present themselves as **the true defenders of the nation**. This is achieved by recontextualizing the actions of controversial historical figures, and highlighting positive aspects while ignoring or justifying their atrocities. A contemporary example of this strategy is the campaign launched by the Spanish neo-fascist group Facta, which uses social media to spread messages that trivialize the negative impact of figures like Franco using heavy politically motivated historical revisionism and defend the culture wars as a key element in order to win the "fight for our civilization". In France, a similar process took place with the repeated statements of Éric Zemmour who claimed to write a 'true history of France': Zemmour's errors, approximations, abusive or tendentious interpretations, as well as lies, led to a harsh response from French historians (Aglan et al., 2022). A similar reaction from historians took place in Spain over the mystifications and public abuse of history by Vox (Casquete, 2023). This shows, as we shall see in the Science section, the link between the scientific study of history and extremist narratives linked to the nation.
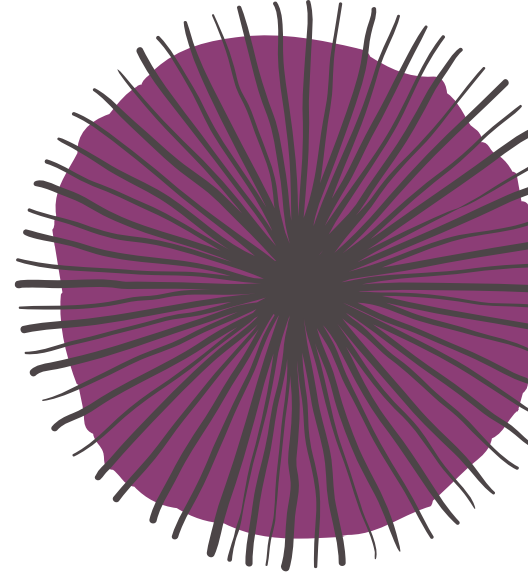
Another case would be **the so-called memory war** in Italy, where the use and abuse of history are reworked to justify the fascist war actions during World War II against the Allied advance with the idea of "they fight for the Homeland" and, finally, "they were killed only because they were Italians". At the same time, there is an operation to criminalize the partisans, who fought for democracy and freedom against fascism during the war. Through such campaigns, they seek to change public perception and normalize ideologies that were previously seen as extreme or unacceptable. Similarly to the memory war in Italy, the criminalization of partisan groups also occurs in Slovenia, where the National Liberation Army is blamed for resisting fascism and Nazism, provoking more victims among Slovenes during the Second World War, meaning the occupation and fascism were not that bad and were not the real problem, but the partisans were the main and unlawful perpetrators of violence during the war.

On the other hand, **illiberalism**, understood or commonly identified as doubting standard democratic procedures – like hindering free elections/not accepting the results – or disregarding its institutions, plays a decisive role in history politics related to historical revisionism, particularly in the trivialization of fascism, especially in countries like Italy, Spain, or Germany, as has been recently seen when the role of the nazi SS (Schutzstaffel, Protection Squadron) was downplayed by Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) MEP Maximilian Krah or when Bjorn Höcke, another AfD leader, demanded a "180-degree turnaround in the memory politics".

In the case of Eastern European countries like Hungary and Poland, illiberal forces narratives step away from the trivialization of fascism in favour of a conservative authoritarianism and have promoted laws against any mention of fascism. Current accounts of Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség (Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance), Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Our Homeland Movement, MHM) and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS) and Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość (Confederation Liberty and Independence) relate, instead, to a kind of law and order notion against the chaotic liberals – guilty of painful post-communist transition – and the left-wing – as successor parties of the communists, who are to blame for 40 years of dictatorship and economic backwardness.

The struggle for the reinterpretation of history and the trivialization of fascism are powerful tactics used by extremist groups to promote a **distorted view of reality**. By idealizing a glorious past, criticizing a decadent present, and promising a hopeful future through illiberal policies, these groups seek to legitimize themselves and gain public support. Understanding these tactics is essential to countering the spread of revisionist – or directly denialist – narratives and preserving a balanced and critical view of history.

That leads to, amongst other elements, the appropriation of patriotism (country symbols and national festivities) or democracy by extremist agents and the proliferation of neo-fascist groups that, thanks to extremists' narratives, manage to move the Overton window – understood as the range of political discourses or policies that are acceptable to the mainstream public – to introduce determined ideologies into the mainstream public and media.

In this sense, **the appropriation and reinterpretation of democracy** can contribute to concealing the continuities in the narratives. In the interwar period, extremist groups didn't pretend to be democrats, but now a lot of them present themselves as the "true democrats" and the executors of the "will of the people" against "globalist elites" who don't care for national identity. Now, many far-right movements and parties have taken up a discourse where they demand real and true democracy. A paradigmatic example, albeit extra-European, would be the case of Trumpism in the United States of America and the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021, in which the assaulters were allegedly fighting against election corruption and, therefore, the true and only defenders of "real" democracy.

In Hungary, for example, the appropriation of democracy is, also, very related to the culture wars. When Fidesz came again to power in 2010, they argued that the 1989 Hungarian transition was an unfinished transformation, so now they would complete the democratic transition by evading the left from institutions. In the case of Poland and the PiS, the situation varies since there is no significant left-wing or liberal party in the domestic arena, only different shades of moderate conservatives to hardcore conservatives to far right, so the fight against the left-wing and liberals means to fight the European Union primarily, focusing the culture war against the "globalist forces" and the EU, thus, saving the nation from outside unwanted influence, narrative-wise.

Even in the case of **the concept of freedom,** there is a clear attempt at appropriation. On the one hand, extremist groups claim freedom in the face of a supposed "progressive dictatorship" – a syntagm used, for example, by the Spanish party Vox – in which the liberal and left-wing elites are imposing a "single thought" or "political correctness". Another example is represented by the demand for freedom in the face of an apparent "health dictatorship", in reference to restriction measures adopted by governments during the Covid 19 pandemic and vaccination obligations. On the other hand, by adopting clearly populist rhetoric, extremist groups say they represent the will of the people, opposing the latter to elites who have emptied democracy, both at a national and European level – the "technocracy of Brussels". A discourse that evidently has a strong Eurosceptic charge.
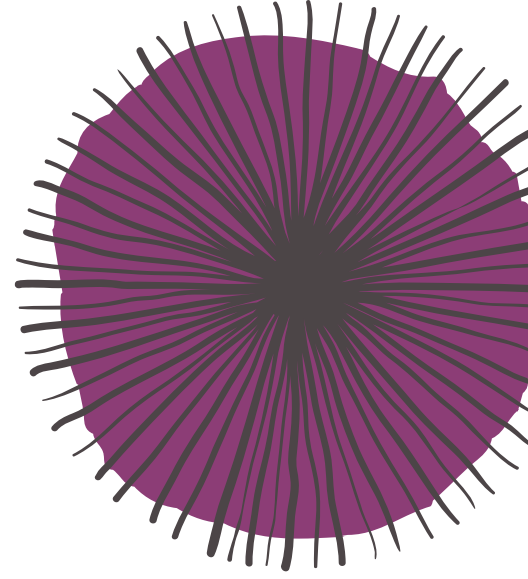
It is interesting to explore the idea of **pride of the nation** as an extremist narrative when it shouldn't have to be one per se. For example, in the Italian case, the pride of being Italians and the idea of Italy as a great nation are linked to the stereotype of "Italians being good people" ("*Italiani brava gente*"). This metanarrative is important not only because it is linked to neo-Nazi or neo-fascist radical groups, but also because it is used by the mainstream parties, thus being key for a better understanding of the use and abuse of history linked to fascist dictatorship and colonialism (see Del Boca, 2005; Focardi, 2020). In the case of Germany, since 1945 extremist stakeholders have always tried to implement counter-narratives that challenge the official memory culture in Germany, but in the last years a new significant trend can be observed: extreme right groups and parties, and especially the AfD, try more and more insistently to hijack some events associated with the fight for democracy and freedom, especially those related to the German Democratic Republic (GDR): the uprising of 1953 and the "peaceful revolution" of 1989. In the latter, the strategy is rather successful because of the emotion that sticks to the memory of 1989 and the political culture and experiences of East German citizens, as defiance towards institutions and media or direct confrontation between the people and the government that saw the people as a threat (Hartmann, 2022; Richardson-Little, Merrill and Arlaud, 2022).

It is also possible to find examples for the Slovenian case, where in May 1997, the Slovenska Demokratska Stranka (Slovenian Democratic Party, SDS) proposed changing a national holiday, Liberation Front Day on April 27. They argued that commemorating resistance against German and Italian occupiers in 1941 was misleading since the Liberation Front was established a day earlier as the Anti-Imperialist Front, initially fighting all imperialist forces. The Liberation Front only shifted focus to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy after the German invasion of Russia. In 1997 the proposers, led by Janez Janša, the leader of SDS, thus questioned the appropriateness of celebrating an anti-capitalist holiday while seeking EU membership. Janša suggested abolishing the holiday in favour of June 26, marking Slovenia's resistance to the Yugoslav Army in 1991, thus framing communism as the enemy, relieving the pressure from fascism and making the changes related to 1989 (1991 in Slovenia) the main focus and a historical moment for national pride.
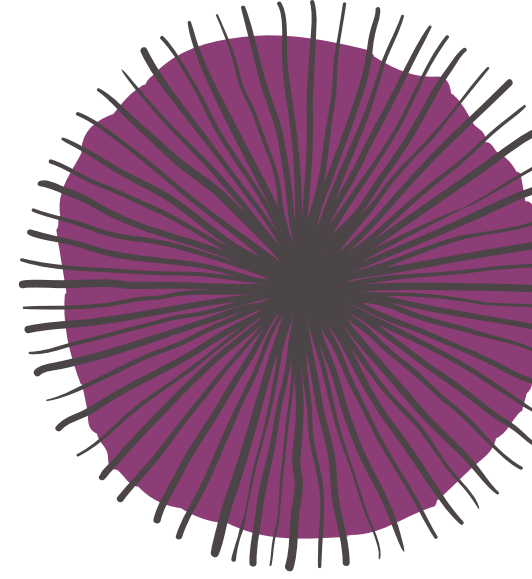
Ethnonationalism and the fall of Europe: a recurrent topic

Extremist narratives present the nation as a living entity that needs to be saved from foreign threats. The nation is considered a **living organism** formed by the dead, the living (the people), and those yet to be born, an idea enunciated at the end of the 19th century by the French ultranationalist Maurice Barrès, founder of Action Française (see Sternhell, 1972). This perception is achieved through extremist narratives, and the in-group is presented as the only possible saviour. To be considered a true Spaniard, French, Italian, Hungarian, etc., it is not enough to be born and live in the country: one must be part of what is defined as authentically national. After the Second World War, conservatives accepted the idea of the nation as anyone living there as a citizen, but now a part of them are reframing this idea towards the notion of the nation as a living entity.

Within this conceptual framework, ethnonationalism thrives as a central ideology for many of the described extremist narratives. Under this ideological shield, we find most **anti-immigration and anti-globalization narratives**, and some conspiracy theories about "globalist powers" (George Soros, Bill Gates, anti-NGOs like Open Arms, etc.). These anti-immigration narratives have crystallized under the idea of "The Fall of Europe", "The Decline of the West" and "The Great Replacement", presented as an existential threat to all countries. The "Fall of Europe" refers to the perception that Europe is in irreversible decline due to mass immigration and the influence of foreign cultures, while "The Great Replacement" is a conspiracy theory suggesting that European populations are being deliberately replaced by immigrants from other cultures, threatening the identity and continuity of European nations (see Ekman, 2022).

These ideas date back to the interwar period when narratives of a decadent continent in danger of being invaded and replaced were common. For example, after the First World War, ideas spread such as those of Oswald Spengler, an intellectual member of the so-called German Conservative Revolution, who supported the thesis of the decline of the West starting from a cyclical vision of history. This a thesis that would have been taken up not only by European fascisms in the 1920s and 1930s but also by important thinkers of neo-fascism after the Second World War such as Julius Evola, who had considerable influence in the new neo-fascist generation of the 1960s and 1970s (see Sedgwick, 2019: 3-69). This recycling of historical concepts shows how extremist narratives reuse and adapt old ideas for contemporary contexts.

Although this might seem counterintuitive, transnational links are the key for ethnonationalist movements in Europe which, in effect, transform into supranationalist movements. A case in question is the Identitarian movement, which creates alliances between radical groups from different countries under the same extremist narrative (see Zuquete, 2018). Another example is the Europa Viva 2024 summit, held in Madrid in May 2024, a meeting that reinforces these extremist alliances and exemplifies how radical groups cooperate and support each other at a pan-European and global level. The slogan used by the Hungarian government for the semester of presidency of the European Union which began in July 2024 is also symptomatic: "Make Europe Great Again".
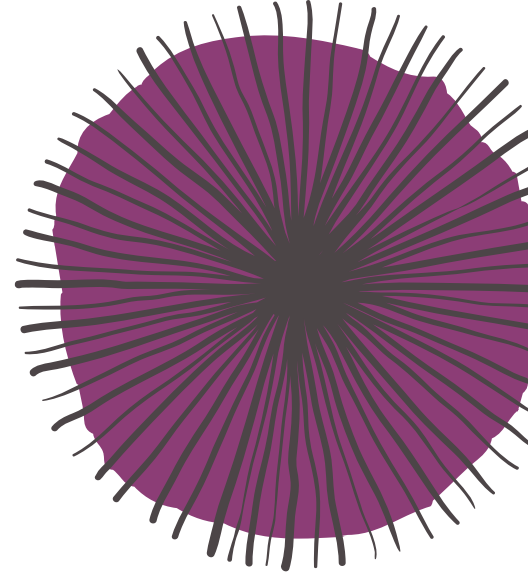
This shows that for many far-right political actors, the nationalism of their own country is not in itself contradictory to the defence of a **pan-European nationalism**. This narrative also has historical roots that start, at least, from the National Socialist New European Order during the Second World War and is updated between the 1960s and 1980s by figures such as Jean Thiriart and the Jeune Europe (Young Europe) movement or by Alain de Benoist and the French Nouvelle Droite (New Right), as well as from mainly Anglo-Saxon white supremacist groups that links it to the Western supremacy and the Aryan race (see Camus and Lebourg, 2017).

On the other hand, in this ethnonationalist space, it is also worth mentioning **femonationalism** (Farris, 2017). Femonationalism is the association between a nationalist ideology and some feminist ideas, especially when driven by xenophobic motivations. Lining up with some of the claims of the feminist movement allows them to justify racist and xenophobic positions, arguing that immigrants are sexist and that Western society is entirely egalitarian. Femonationalism is particularly pronounced in the Nordic context. In Finland, while being critical of feminism, and the so-called gender ideology in general, gender equality is nonetheless an important element in constructing nationalism in the extremist discourse. As Askola (2019: 54) puts it, the far right is "known for viewing the promotion of gender equality as unnecessary or even harmful – except when they highlight immigration as a threat to female emancipation".
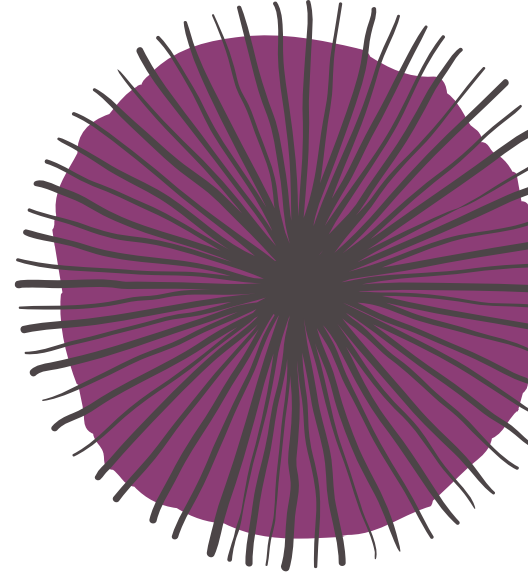
Femonationalism is also pronounced in the context of France where many debates around the veil and the burkini have been heated for many years already. Though femonationalists present themselves as "defenders" of women, the criticism of veil-wearing for instance is a way not only to ostracise Muslim populations at large but also to stigmatise Muslim women for accepting patriarchal and sexist practices. The Rassemblement National (National Rally, RN) leader, Marine Le Pen, has been clearly using a femonationalist discourse: for instance, in 2021 after the murder of a young girl in Créteil, she claimed that the "Talibanisation" of certain *banlieues* threatened dangerously women's rights in the country.

In this sense, the underlying ideology of femonationalism is ethnonationalism, not feminism or women's rights. Xenophobia uses feminism as a means to an end (instrumentalisation), but the ultimate goal is to fight against immigrants, especially Muslims. In this case, women's rights are just the wrapping in which they hide their true ideology. Therefore, femonationalism, as **homonationalism**, is an example of ideological parasitism or semantic hijacking that helps purple-wash ethnonationalist agents, hiding their ideas under the pretext of defending women's rights (about ideological parasitism and semantic hijacking, see Forti, 2021: 169-217; Eltchaninoff, 2018). This contributes to the normalization of extremist parties, which try to dissociate themselves from their dark past to "centre" themselves and attract as many voters as possible.

Anti-Communism and the enemies of the "people"

Furthermore, the ideological perspective of ethnonationalism leads us to one of the major narratives within the theme of "nation": the **anti-Nation**, understood as who a true French, Spaniard, Hungarian, Finnish, German, Slovenian, etc. is, and who is not. Anything that falls outside the parameters of the in-group is not a true citizen/patriot. The only true nation is the one they have conceived. The in-group of this narrative often refers to itself as "Patriots". "The time of the patriots" is a recurring slogan among some far-right parties across Europe, such as Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI), Vox in Spain, RN in France or Patriots for Europe, a recently created European faction led by Viktor Orbán and Marine Le Pen. The problematisation they describe is the previously mentioned "Fall of Europe", supported by conspiracy theories such as "The Great Replacement", a theory now not only used by far-right parties, but also by mainstream right-wing parties like Les Républicains (The Republicans, LR) in France, especially by their candidate Valerie Pécresse, or the "White Cleansing". Within this metanarrative of the Anti-Nation, it is possible to find other related themes such as gender and science.
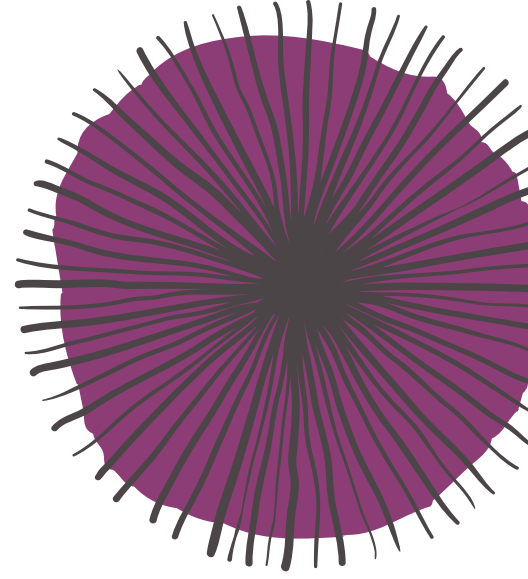
We can take the Spanish case as a generalised sample of the European framework, with **the idea of anti-Spain** being an example that combines the recycling of the past and the construction of the Other, that is the enemies of the "people". Historically, anti-Spain has been a recurring theme in the Spanish nationalist narrative, developing since the 19th century with figures such as Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, who advocated an ultra-nationalism based on Catholic fundamentalism, tradition and the Spanish Empire. Franco's regime (1939-1975) labelled their antagonistic frontier as the anti-Spain, and this tag was used to delegitimise opponents of Francoism, portraying republicanism and other progressive movements as a threat to national unity and, therefore, the nation itself. Franco positioned himself as the saviour of Spain, justifying brutal repression against his opponents. After Franco's death and the transition to democracy, the concept persisted in certain conservative political discourses and was used to discredit those who advocated greater regional autonomy.

Today, the idea remains a key tool in extremist narratives, especially on the far right, which define "good Spaniards" as defenders of the nation against its enemies. The "good Spaniards" include far-right parties such as Vox, some sectors of the Partido Popular (People's Party, PP), illiberal movements, neo-fascist groups, far-right think tanks and Christian fundamentalists. On the other hand, the anti-Spain include left-wing parties, Catalan, Basque or Galician nationalisms, feminism, the LGBTIQ+ movement, "globalist powers", "climate fanatics", multiculturalism and the EU institutions.

This **construction of the Other** as an existential threat seeks to create a clear division between the defenders of the nation and its enemies, perpetuating a narrative of confrontation and exclusion, presenting the in-group as the only possible saviour of the nation. Elements such as the one described can be found across all of Europe, for example, in France, where RN secretary, Jordan Bardella, tagged the left-wing coalition as "an existential threat to the French nation" while presenting his party as "patriots" in a similar way as of Orbán in Hungary, FdI in Italy or the Freiheitliche Partei Österreich (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ).

The cases of Croatia and Serbia are also symptomatic since Yugoslavia is seen from the perspective of Croats as a country where Croats did not have rights, and from the perspective of Serbia as a country where Serbs were always giving too much to others, an idea that is highly entangled with the anti-Western narratives in both cases. In the Croatian case, for example, the Domovinski pokret's (Homeland Movement, DP) election campaign said that the vote for Andrej Plenković from the Hrvatska demokratska zajednica (Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ) is a vote for the rapists and for war criminals, and their continued freedom in reference to Serbs since it is argued that the citizens of Croatia are paying for the expansion of the Serbian world. Thus, the Serbs are framed as rapists and war criminals. Furthermore, Eurosceptic ideas are also introduced again in the election campaign, saying that the "Vukovar Croatia" will not be listening to the dictate of either Brussels or Belgrade.
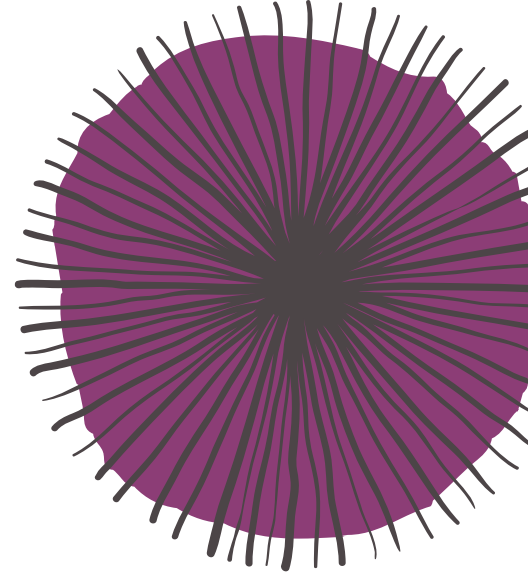
In relation to those who are considered **enemies of the people**, that is members who do not belong to the nation, anti-communism and/or anti-marxism plays a determining role and is established as a recycling of extremist discourses from the interwar period fascism. In the Weimar Republic, for instance, Hitler and the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party, NSDAP), used "Marxist" as an umbrella term to discredit their political enemies and the "Marxists" were not only the communists but also the social democrats and the liberals. The creation of **anti-communist discourse** legalised and instrumentalised in politics is important, especially when Eastern Europe – Hungary or Poland, for example – started to demand that the communist past was a European suffering, not just Eastern European. Anti-communism, especially in its contemporary form, remains a cornerstone of far-right extremist narratives. In recent years, the term communism has significantly expanded to include not only an economic position but also a wide range of progressive ideas. This concept is known as cultural Marxism, and it is presented as a mortal threat to Western nations and cultures, equating it with Islam as an existential enemy (Jamin, 2018).

In this narrative, communism is not limited to an economic ideology but encompasses a supposed agenda of **cultural Marxism**, "wokeness" or Eco-Marxism. This agenda includes elements such as multiculturalism, seen as a threat to cultural homogeneity and traditional values; progressivism, representing any initiative or idea that promotes social change or justice; and cancel culture, perceived as an attack on freedom of expression and traditions. This construction of the Other as an existential threat seeks to create a clear division between the defenders of the nation and its enemies, perpetuating a narrative of confrontation and exclusion.

In this sense, cultural Marxism is presented as a sort of clandestine movement seeking to destroy moral values and traditional European societies. This narrative argues that progressive forces are infiltrating all areas of society to weaken national identity and social cohesion. The fight against this enemy is seen as a battle for the survival of the nation and its fundamental values. In that context, modern anti-communism, or simply anti-Marxism, is articulated as a defence against a vast conspiracy that seeks to uproot traditional values through the promotion of progressive ideas. In this framework, any movement advocating for equality, social justice, or cultural diversity is demonised as part of a larger plot to undermine Western civilization. According to this narrative, the enemies of the nation not only include traditional communists but also a wide variety of progressive and liberal groups.

Accordingly, feminism is seen as a destroyer of traditional gender roles, while the LGBTIQ+ movement is perceived as a threat to morality and the traditional family. The so-called "globalist powers" and NGOs are accused of promoting policies that undermine national sovereignty, and critical media are labelled as propagators of cultural Marxism. The institutions of the EU are seen as agents of globalisation trying to impose liberal and progressive values and environmental movements are denounced for prioritising the climate agenda over national interests. In Germany, climate activists like the Letzte Generation (last Generation) movement and the ecologist party Die Grünen (The Greens) have become one of the main targets of AfD politicians, who stigmatise them as "eco-socialist" or "eco-Marxist".

At the same time, while attacking climate activists, far-right parties praise the virtues of the countryside as it is possible to exemplify with the Serbian case, in which the far-right party Srpska stranka Zavetnici (Serbian Party Oathkeepers, SSZ), centres on the regeneration of the villages, with the peasants perceived as the guardian of the state, family, the nation and the values of their society.

In summary, nowadays anti-communism is presented as a broad cultural struggle against cultural Marxism. This narrative allows extremist groups to consolidate a nationalist and authoritarian identity, opposing any effort to promote equality, social justice, or cultural diversity. By expanding the definition of communism and/or Marxism to include a wide range of social movements, these groups seek to delegitimize and oppose any effort to promote equality, social justice, or cultural diversity.
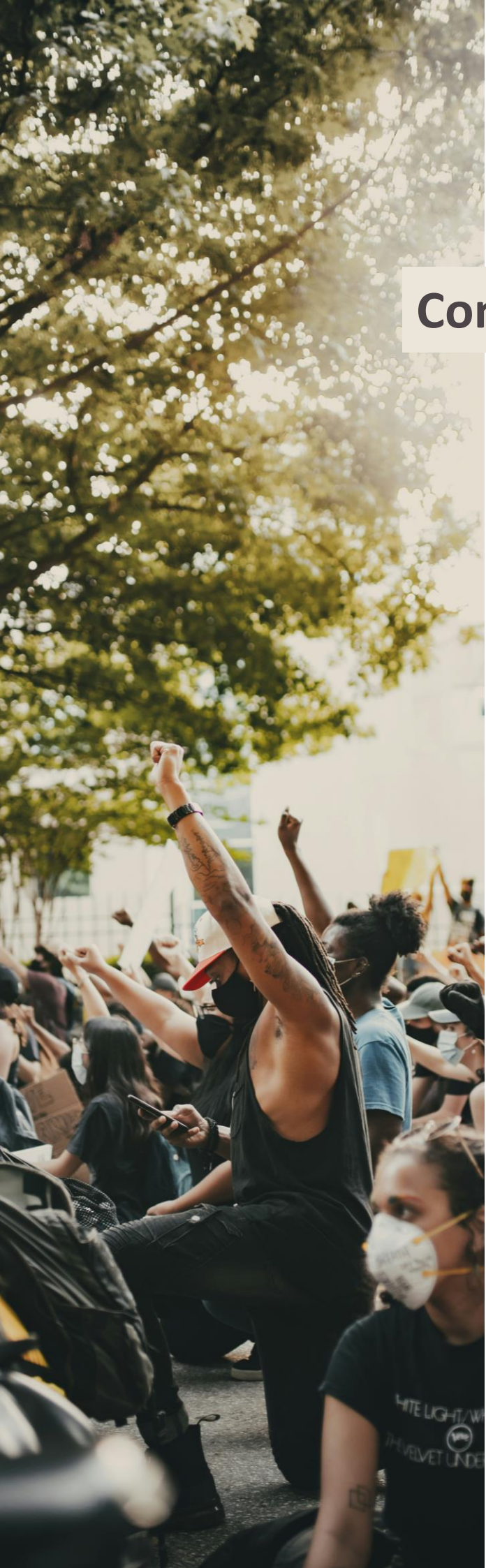
Conclusion

The perpetuation and adaptation of extremist narratives play a fundamental role in the formation and evolution of national and cultural identities. Rhizome theory suggests that these narratives expand non-linearly, allowing for their continued relevance and adaptation in different historical and social contexts. The cultural battle for control of these narratives is crucial, as extremist groups use **historical revisionism** and the trivialisation of fascism to legitimise authoritarian policies. Furthermore, ethno-nationalism and contemporary anti-communism extend these narratives by portraying foreign and progressive threats as dangers to national identity. Understanding and countering these tactics is essential for the promotion of democratic and pluralist values.

04

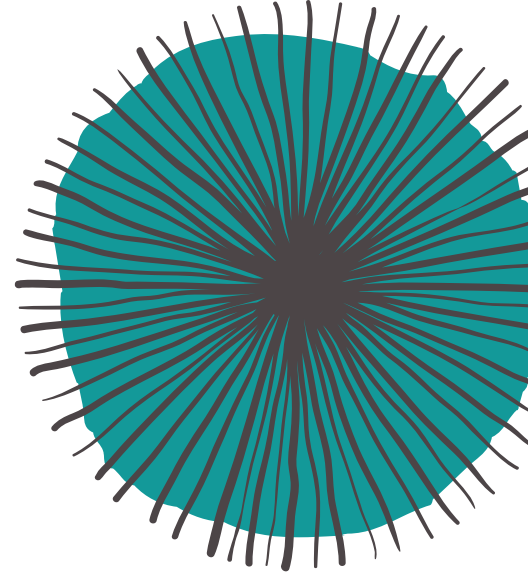# HISTORICAL ROOTS OF EXTREMIST NARRATIVES: GENDER
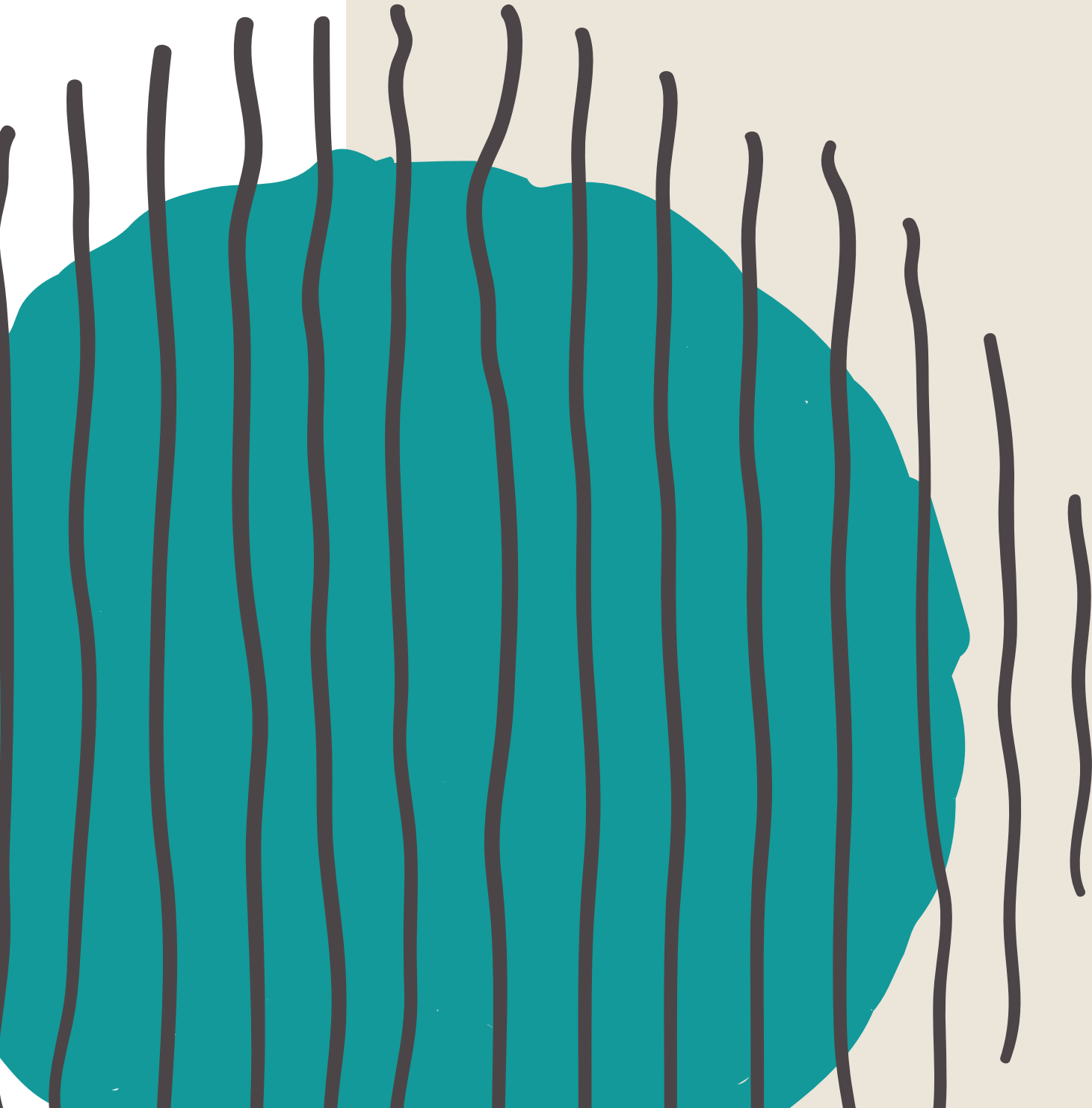
Executive summary

In numerous European countries, gender rights, reproductive rights and LGBTQI+ rights are currently threatened and undermined. Extremist gender narratives, often rooted in long-standing historical contexts, are being propagated by both political and non-political actors. This section of the report takes an in-depth look at the historical roots of extremist narratives around gender as well as their contemporary manifestations. Understanding the historical roots of **extremist gender narratives**, as well as their readjustments, mutations or changes is essential to understand the rise and mediatisation of these narratives today. This understanding is also crucial for proposing solutions to counter these extremist narratives and their social and political impacts. Furthermore, these extremist narratives fuel reactionary and conservative responses emerging in several European countries.

To this end, we first examine the origins of the so-called **gender ideology**. We define anti-gender narratives that can be considered extremist, in the sense that they challenge common values of respect and attack the rights of certain groups, particularly women and LGBTQI+ individuals.

Extremist narratives concerning gender are rooted in a century-old vision of gender that was consolidated during the nineteenth century with conceptions of gender roles and traditional views on the role of women based on a "natural order". These ideas are now being revitalised by new political and non-political actors in nearly all the countries examined. This section also analyses anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQI+ extremist narratives in Europe.

Additionally, in most of the countries studied, anti-gender narratives cannot be understood without considering the influence of religion and the Church. Extremist narratives around gender are also connected to other types of narratives such as anti-immigration or Islamophobic narratives that will be analysed in the last part of the section.

Introduction

Firstly, it is important to highlight that the narratives we now regard as extremist were not always seen in this light. For instance, what are now considered "radical" narratives in terms of gender, such as the heteronormative idea of the "normal" family with strict gender division, were once widely accepted by large segments of society.
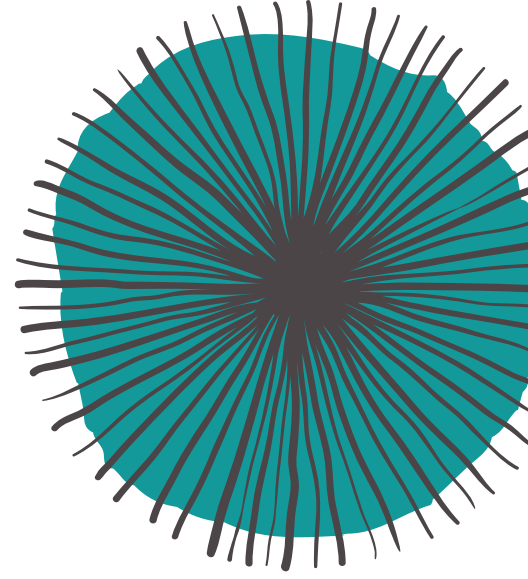
Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the historical roots of gender-based narratives and how these narratives have become extremist and politicised, especially over the last thirty years. By anti-gender extremist narratives, we mean all narratives that question the progress and changes in gender relations between men and women, deny gender as a social construct and the power dynamics it conceals, fail to challenge patriarchy, and oppose women's bodily autonomy and the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals. The narratives we now label as anti-gender defend a nineteenth-century vision of the family and a supposed "**natural order**", which naturalises, dehistoricises, and invisibilises the relations of domination between men and women (Guillaumin, 1992) and the subordination of women to patriarchal power in all spheres of society. A key characteristic of extremist discourses is the call for a return to a mystified past where gender relations were largely codified and rigid.

The radicalisation of extremist narratives on gender depends on at least these main factors. First, we must consider the evolution of society over time and the fact that these narratives have transitioned from being widely accepted by broad sectors of society to being considered more marginal, as they no longer align with the evolution of mentalities and laws.

Second, It is necessary to identify the actors who continue to uphold these narratives that no longer align with society and their social and political impact. Extremist counter-narratives are not only connected to the progressive acquisitions themselves but also to the actors who have introduced them. In this sense, extremist anti-gender narratives can be understood as counter-narratives against advances in gender equality but also as a more general opposition to left-liberal ideologies and against a supposed intellectual elite.

Third, the radicalisation of extremist narratives must be also situated within a context of social polarisation and the electoral success of far-right parties in several European countries. These parties put forward narratives based on binaries such as "Us" vs. "Them", "People" vs. "Elites" and within these binaries gender ideology is positioned as an internal enemy or an outside influence working against the nation. These narratives have become extremist in that the far right has politicised them to push for reforms against legislative and social progress in most societies considered as "Western" since the second half of the 20th century.

Regarding the evolution of anti-gender narratives, there are at least three significant moments of resurgence:

1. **First wave of anti-gender mobilisation in the 80's**. The strong feminist movements of the 1970s brought significant changes, such as the legal recognition of rights (abortion rights, combating gender-based violence, access to contraceptives, and laws promoting work-life balance), and placed various feminist demands on the political agenda. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist activists in former Yugoslavia challenged the socialist authorities' claims of having resolved the "women's question", revealing the disparity between the rhetoric of equality and the persistent discrimination. These demands and advancements triggered strong opposition all over Europe. Perhaps the most notable example was the phenomenon known in the United States as the "backlash" (Faludi, 1991) against women during the conservative administration of Ronald Reagan. Similar trends occurred across Europe, albeit in somewhat subtler forms. In the 1990s, the debate on abortion rights re-emerged prominently, and the formation of the first organisations representing divorced fathers marked the beginnings of some masculinist groups that criticise advances in women's rights and new gender relations.

2. **Second wave of anti-gender narratives from the 2000s onward**. Laws allowing same-sex marriage were passed in numerous European countries (such as Spain, France, Ireland, Sweden, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway, Finland, Portugal...), prompting a cross-border mobilisation against these laws. Concurrently, the right to abortion came back under scrutiny and was challenged in certain European countries (like Spain, Poland, Hungary etc.), with various "Marches for Life" and other forms of mobilisation organised across Europe.

3. **MeToo movement from 2017**. This movement, alongside mass mobilisations in other regions like Latin America against femicides and in support of reproductive rights, has had a transnational impact amplified by social networks, bolstering global feminist activism. Concurrently, the MeToo movement caused many counter-reactions that have reinvigorated and strengthened various anti-feminist and masculinist movements all over Europe and beyond.
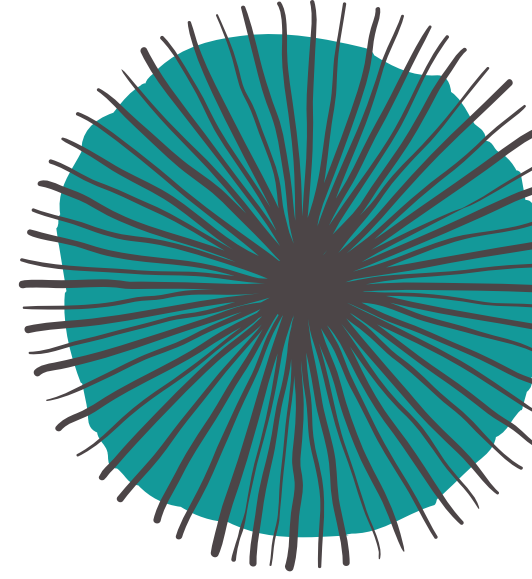
"Gender ideology" and anti-gender politics

The concept of "gender ideology" originated in the 1990s, with a series of speeches delivered by the Vatican (Prearo and Garbagnoli, 2018) in response to the UN World Conferences in Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995). More broadly, "gender ideology" is also linked to anti-globalisation movements, characterised by a strong anti-communism, antimarxism, anti-left and anti-multiculturalism rhetoric, and framed within the context of the so-called culture war.
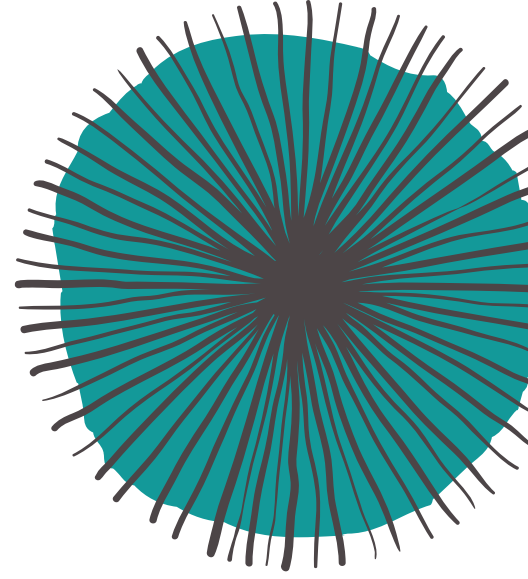
In Italy, for instance, there was an early effort to form a coalition against "gender ideology" involving both the Vatican and various conservative groups. This coalition sought to initiate anti-gender campaigns with the goal of obstructing laws that support LGBTQI+ rights or women's rights. In Germany, the AfD and other far-right parties such as Die Heimat (The Homeland) have consistently criticised what they term "gender mainstreaming". The term appeared in Die Heimat's 2010 program and later in the 2016 AfD program, along with terms like "Gender-terror" or "Gender-madness" ("Genderwahn" or "Gendergaga") which became common hashtags on social media.

In general, what has been observed in several countries such as Italy, Spain, Germany or France is that gender ideology is conceptualised by the far

right, and to a certain extent by some conservative parties, as an "exogenous" ideology that notably comes from the United States. The same phenomenon is observed with the concept of Woke ideology, which also encompasses LGBTQI+ issues. [1]

Another characteristic of today's extremist anti-gender narratives is the denial of the existence of structural **gender violence**, which these narratives analyse within the framework of interpersonal relationships, and the opposition to legal measures against gender-based violence. In this sense, the Istanbul Convention (2011) – on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – has been fiercely opposed by many actors around Europe. In Spain, one of the objectives of the far-right party Vox was the suppression of the Law Against Gender Violence (Ley Integral contra la Violencia de Género) passed in 2004 by the socialist government of José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, as well as the 2022 law against gender violence which was expanded in 2024. Not all far-right parties deny the existence of gender violence per se but often put the blame on immigrants who are presented as the main perpetrators.

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1. There is no clear definition of 'Woke' but according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary woke means being "aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)". The "war on woke" or "anti-woke culture war" can be defined as an ideological battle against social justice movements – such as anti-racism, anti-sexism and pro-LGBTQ rights – using far-right tropes and conspiracism.
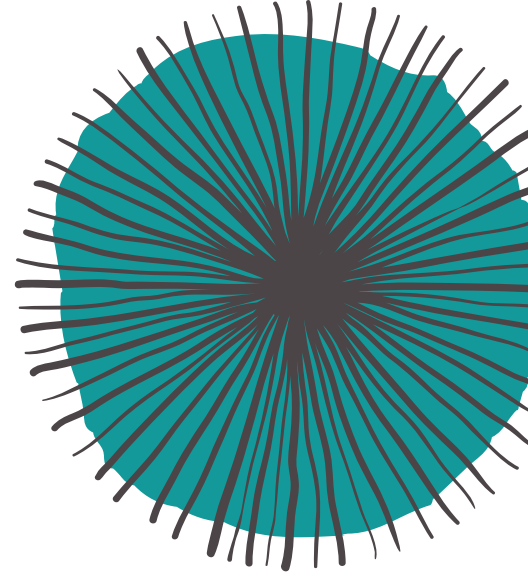
It is also worth mentioning that the term "gender ideology" does not primarily refer to gender studies. On the contrary, it is a term coined to oppose both feminist and LGBTQI+ activism that deconstructs essentialist and naturalist assumptions about gender and sexuality. According to those who coined and instrumentalised the term, "gender ideology" constitutes a threat to many societies, especially in the West (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018). However, there were cases where anti-gender discourses were directly connected with gender studies. Perhaps the most notable example is Hungary, where in 2018, public authorities removed the accreditation of an MA programme in gender studies, which affected two universities: the state Eötvös Loránd University and the Central European University. To some extent, this attack on gender studies in Hungary overlaps with the targeting of the Central European University and more generally of its founder George Soros. This example emphasises the fact that anti-gender discourses are central to the right-wing populist and far-right movements which have been on the rise in Europe and globally over the last ten years and that they are themselves structured as a discourse juxtaposing "innocent, gender-conservative people" against those spreading "gender ideology" (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 112).

It is noteworthy, however, that in Hungary, other universities and **gender studies** programs have also faced challenges, with gender studies being replaced by family studies, reflecting a broader political shift. In Germany, the AfD has also opposed state support for gender studies, dismissing them as "pseudoscientific" (2016) and solely ideologically and politically motivated. In France, the far right opposed the introduction of the "ABCD de l'égalité" – a program to combat sexism and gender stereotypes – in the school curriculum, perceived as an instrument to impose "gender theory" on children. In Spain, a similar situation has occurred: the far-right party Vox and the conservative People's Party, who jointly govern in several regions, have opposed the introduction of sex-affective and gender education in schools, considering it indoctrination.

Anti-gender mobilisations have become more visible in public debates over Europe in the past years, but their roots are deeper and politics against gender were put forward long before the advent of contemporary anti-gender campaigns. Indeed "notwithstanding national differences across Europe, gender and sexuality have for a long time been important pillars of radical right-wing ideologies" (Sauer, 2019: 173). We can observe that these anti-gender campaigns have operated within a transnational framework for several decades already, as they share the same modes of action, rhetoric and strategies (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2018).

It is a phenomenon presenting itself as unified around Europe and beyond, with the same slogans and the same forms of mobilisation used by transnational organisations, such as the World Congress of Families, CitizenGo or Political Network for Values, that have received from 2009 to 2018 a total of 707.2 million dollars by religious extremist funders (Datta, 2021). For instance, the anti-abortion March for Life, organised in the USA since 1974, has branched all over Europe for several decades already: Marche pour la vie in France, Marcia per la Vita in Italy or Sí a la Vida in Spain. Of course, it is also necessary to disentangle and localise the interpretation of this anti-gender mobilisation that might take slightly different forms depending on the national context.
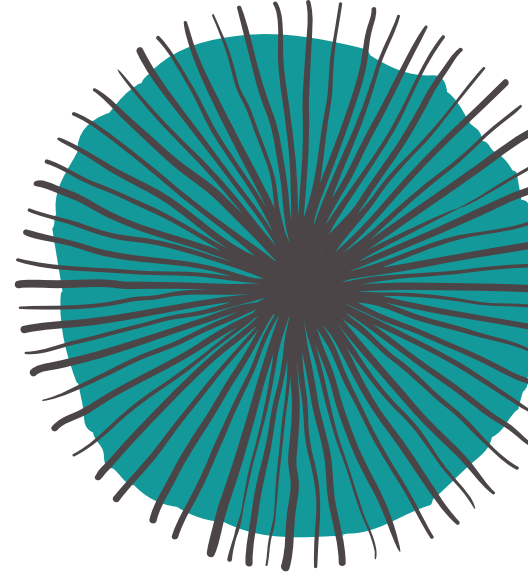
Gender as a "natural order"

Extremist narratives on gender are often constructed around the regulation and reinstatement of the "natural order" between men and women. While conservatives often invoke **a "traditional" order**, often with a religious dimension, more radical and extremist actors – both within and outside the political sphere – tend to emphasise **a "natural" order** rooted in biological elements that have traditionally justified the exclusion of women from the public and political sphere. Some far-right parties, like the AfD in Germany, may strategically navigate between these interpretations to blur the lines between what is perceived as socially "acceptable" versus extremist viewpoints.

The romanticisation of past relationships between men and women and traditional values often evokes a sense of nostalgia for a simpler and more idealised historical era, not only the 19th century but also the 1950s when gender roles were supposedly well-defined and simpler. In fact, after the end of the Second World War, countries considered Western saw a resurgence of the rigidification of gender roles and a reassertion of women into domestic spheres, accompanied by a renewed "**mystique of femininity**". Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe, women's position in society was perceived differently, for instance in Yugoslavia women's political, social, and economic rights were included in the new Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia already in 1946, mainly due to their participation in the antifascist resistance. However, in

general, this yearning for a bygone era often translated into a focus on safeguarding the nuclear family structure with its often-heteronormative ideals and a gender binary "which is perceived as natural and is combined with a traditional gendered division of labour in the heterosexual model of the male breadwinner and the woman as mother." (Sauer, 2019: 173).

For instance, in Germany, **the defence of the "traditional family"** (father, mother, child) and criticism of the perceived "discrimination" against "mothers-and-housewives" (Beatrix von Storch, AfD) can be traced back to the Kaiserreich period of the 19th century when the slogan "Kinder-Küche-Kirche" (children-kitchen-church) emerged. This sentiment is also rooted in the prevalent model of the "housewife marriage" during the 1950s in the Federal Republic. However, this concept is also closely linked to biological perspectives that can be traced back to the National Socialist ideology, which influenced role models in subsequent periods. This is evident in how far-right parties like Die Heimat or individuals like Björn Höcke (AfD) define the family as the "germ cell" of the *Volk*, tasked with preserving an intact *Volk*. The opposition to "gender mainstreaming" that emerged around 2010 can be seen as an adaptation of these earlier narratives.
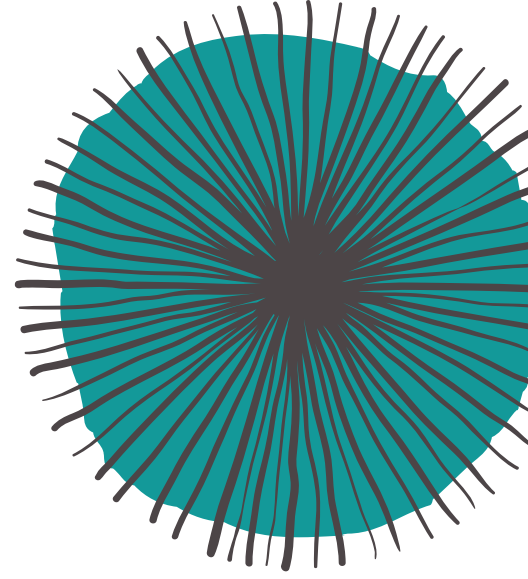
In Spain, Vox has revived the myth of the anti-Spain in which gender ideology represents a direct attack upon the traditional society and moral values. In this sense, Vox's discourse has been recycling a series of ideas present in Franco's National Catholicism: the defence of traditional family values and the traditional heterosexual family as the basis of society. In France, the Vichy government brought back the gender politics that had been rejected during France's social struggles in the 1930s. A series of laws and incentives were implemented to reinforce the role of women as stay-at-home wives and men as the primary earners and heads of the family. The Vichy regime justified the legal and social subordination of women by invoking theories of "natural" gender inequality and the "eternal" opposition between the masculine and the feminine (Muel-Dreyfus, 1996).

The Front National (National Front, FN) continued using this narrative and defending family as the centre of the nation and women as housewives and mothers. According to the FN in 2001: "The family ensures the transmission of values, norms and traditions of civilisation to the people who belong to its members". This narrative manifested itself in a program that advocated for large families and encouraged women to prioritise homemaking, motherhood, or part-time work. Preserving or reinstating this natural order between men and women was seen as a fundamental element for the survival of White, Christian civilisation. Gradually, the Front National and then the subsequent Rassemblement National adopted a more moderate stance on gender issues, at least rhetorically, leading to greater inclusivity, such as proposing the constitutionalisation of the right to abortion in 2022.

More recently, the leader of the French far-right party Reconquête (Reconquest), Éric Zemmour, has occupied the political space left by the Rassemblement National on gender-related issues and has put forward the notion of civilisational survival. Zemmour advocates for the reinstatement of the natural order and constructs an idealised image of France, a lost country that French people remember fondly and with sadness. Zemmour has strongly voiced his disapproval of gender theory – and intellectuals who promote this ideology, especially university scholars – and its harmful societal impact, asserting that its emergence in the 1970s-80s has prompted young individuals to question their gender identities and reject the concept of gender as a biological fact. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni has attacked the "gender ideology" which will lead according to her to "the disappearance of women and above all the end of motherhood".

Antifeminist extremist narratives

The origins of anti-feminist narratives – that oppose, undermine, or reject feminist principles and efforts toward achieving gender equality – can be traced back to the 19th and 20th centuries, when ideas were recycled and reused from earlier anti-feminist groups that for instance opposed women's presence in the public sphere, particularly in politics.
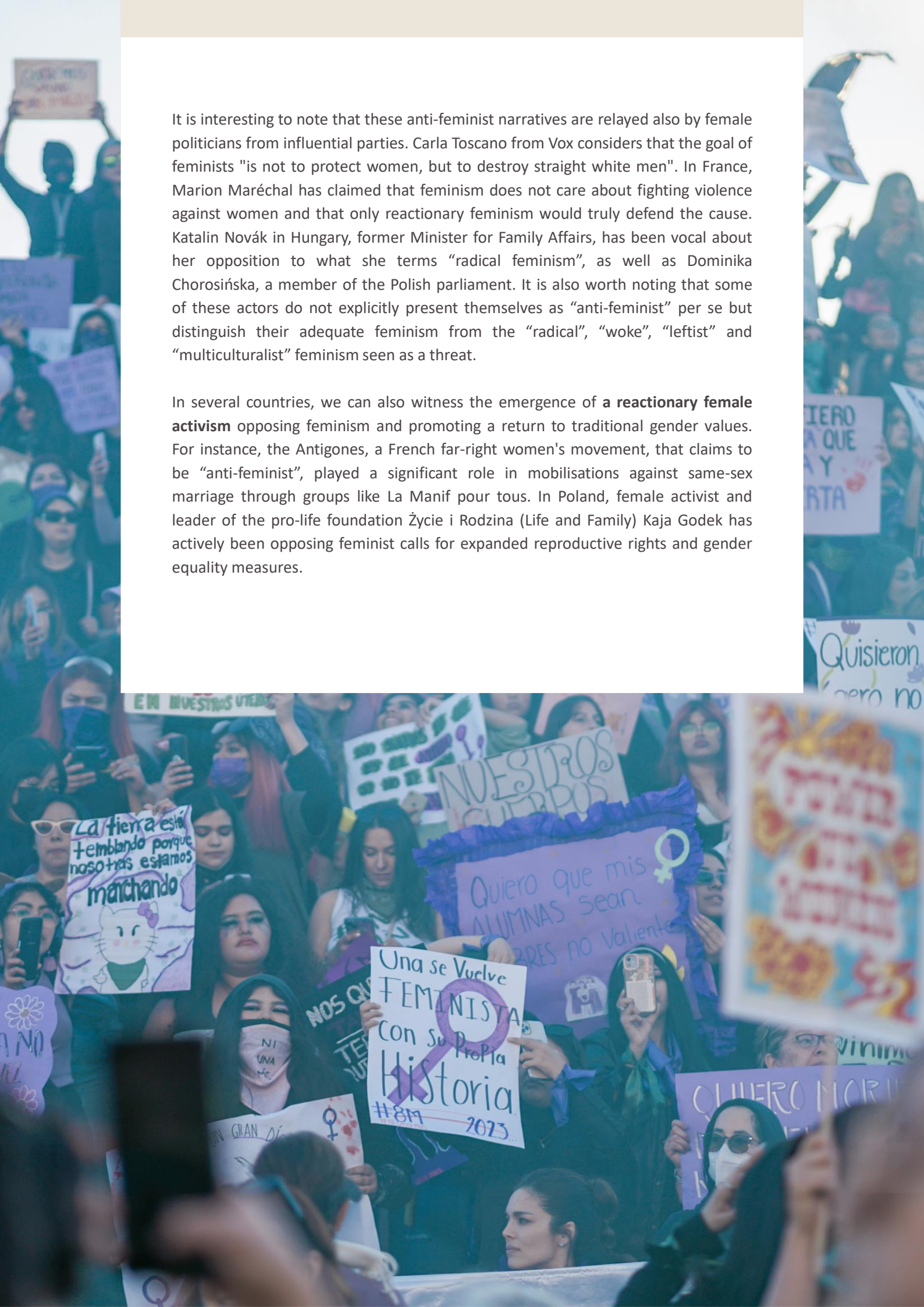
During the 1970s, one of the main causes of the feminist movement was the fight for **abortion rights**. At the time, very few countries had legalised abortion in Europe, except for Yugoslavia where abortion was legal already from 1952 and even constitutionally guaranteed in 1974, and Hungary where abortion was liberalised in 1953. In many countries, the 1970s marked the beginning of the decriminalisation of abortion: France in 1975, followed by Italy in 1978, the Netherlands in 1984, Spain in 1985, Greece in 1986, Belgium in 1990, and Germany in 1992. In these countries, there was strong opposition against the decriminalisation of abortion from religious and conservative movements. Political parties also took a stand against abortion: in Spain, the People's Party strongly opposed the decriminalisation of abortion on religious grounds, and in France, the Front National aimed at abolishing the Veil law.[2]

Indeed, one of the main pillars of extremist anti-gender narratives was and remains the fight against abortion: anti-abortion mobilisations, encompassed in the so-called "pro-life" movements, operate on a transnational level. In recent years, we have witnessed attempts to influence public policies with for instance the presence of pro-life associations in public hospitals in Italy. Additionally, in several countries, abortion laws have actually been restricted such as Poland, and

Hungary where despite having long-standing liberal abortion laws, this right has been also challenged under Orbán's government.
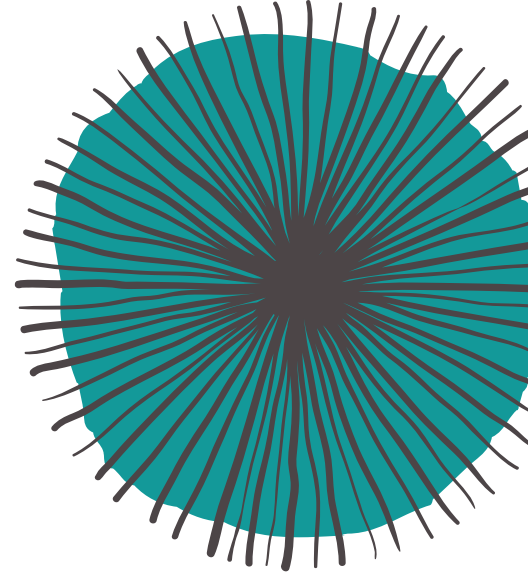
Anti-feminist narratives portrayed feminists as a threat to social order, to the family model, and to society but also lamented the perceived decline of male power. This victimising rhetoric has been repurposed by far-right and masculinist groups all over Europe. Indeed, these anti-feminist narratives fed the **manosphere** that has been gaining traction in many countries in Europe this past decade or so. In some cases, women are also spreading these extremist masculinist narratives such as French far-right activist and social media influencer Thaïs d'Escufon who served as the spokesperson of the ultra-nationalist and Islamophobic Génération Identitaire (Generation Identity). D'escoufon's audience is formed mostly of men, and she spreads narratives promoting female chastity, motherhood and a **"tradwife" model**. Influential in the USA, the "tradwife" movement – influenced by Christian religious values and conservative politics and spread by alt-right movements – has also gained traction in Europe in the past few years, even in countries where gender equality is highly valued, such as Finland, with online influencers self-identifying as "feminists".

2. The Veil Law, named after politician Simone Veil, is a landmark piece of French legislation that legalised abortion in France. This law passed in 1975, was a significant milestone in women's rights and reproductive freedom in France.

It is interesting to note that these anti-feminist narratives are relayed also by female politicians from influential parties. Carla Toscano from Vox considers that the goal of feminists "is not to protect women, but to destroy straight white men". In France, Marion Maréchal has claimed that feminism does not care about fighting violence against women and that only reactionary feminism would truly defend the cause. Katalin Novák in Hungary, former Minister for Family Affairs, has been vocal about her opposition to what she terms "radical feminism", as well as Dominika Chorosińska, a member of the Polish parliament. It is also worth noting that some of these actors do not explicitly present themselves as "anti-feminist" per se but distinguish their adequate feminism from the "radical", "woke", "leftist" and "multiculturalist" feminism seen as a threat.

In several countries, we can also witness the emergence of **a reactionary female activism** opposing feminism and promoting a return to traditional gender values. For instance, the Antigones, a French far-right women's movement, that claims to be "anti-feminist", played a significant role in mobilisations against same-sex marriage through groups like La Manif pour tous. In Poland, female activist and leader of the pro-life foundation Życie i Rodzina (Life and Family) Kaja Godek has actively been opposing feminist calls for expanded reproductive rights and gender equality measures.
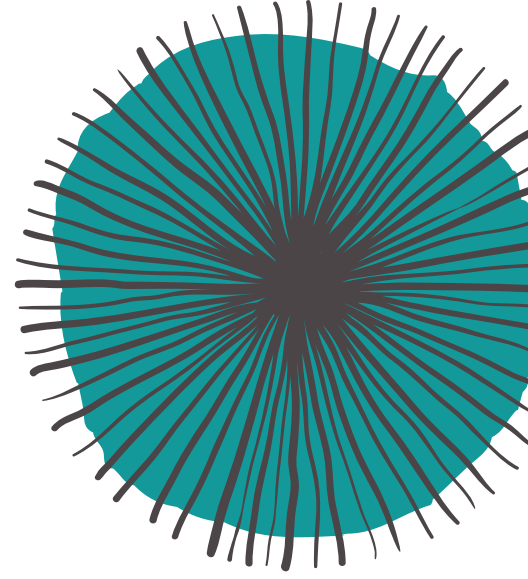
Extremist narratives on LGBTQI+ rights

After the first demonstrations in defence of LGTBQI+ rights in the 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s were marked by a reactionary wave in the wake of the AIDS epidemic that was used in many countries to stigmatise the homosexual population. One of the first demands of homosexual collectives was the decriminalisation of homosexuality from the Penal Code, the depathologisation of homosexuality, and the recognition of same-sex marriage and adoption.

These demands were received with a strong pushback by far-right parties and movements. In 1984, Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of FN, claimed that homosexuality "constitutes a biological and social anomaly" that can lead to "the end of the world". For the Front National, the so-called homosexual lobbies were originally presented as a danger to the existence of the traditional family: "the family, target of all attacks" and all the evils came from May 68 with its individualistic and selfish spirit. In general, for the far right, the main threats to the traditional heterosexual family put forward were the so-called gay lobbies, same-sex marriage, abortion, divorce, and single-parent families.

However, the position of some far-right parties has evolved over time and moved towards a seemingly more tolerant approach regarding LGBTQI+ rights. For instance, Marine Le Pen adapted her discourse to attract a larger electorate, in contrast to her father who used to make openly homophobic comments. In the past few years, several key figures of the Rassemblement National have come out as gay: Julien Odoul, Jean-Philippe Tanguy, Sébastien Chenu, and before them Florian Philippot and Steeve Briois. The same situation can be seen in Germany with Alice Weidel (AfD) who is openly homosexual while her party never ceases to denounce what they call the "Regenbogen-Propaganda" (Rainbow-Propaganda).

A similar process can be seen in Finland: the Finns Party had fiercely opposed the law on same-sex marriage for many years before it was finally voted in 2001, making Finland the last country in the Nordic to adopt such a law. But more recently, leading figures of the party such as Sebastian Tynkkynen came out publicly as gay while being openly Islamophobic, in a similar way as Pym Fortuyn at the beginning of this century in the Netherlands. This apparently progressive attitude towards LGBTQI+ rights serves not only as an electoral strategy but also as a new tactic that involves using LGBTQI+ rights to ostracise other communities, especially the Muslim communities. This is the phenomenon of **homonationalism** as defined by Jasbir Puar (2007), which refers to the increasing acceptance of LGBT rights by (mainly Western) nations, and the parallel complicity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and associations with nationalist policies to condemn Muslims as "homophobic".

Including LGBTQ+ members does not mean that far-right parties are promoting or advancing LGBTQ+ rights, and it can sometimes work against the cause. In Serbia, the previous PM and current president of the Parliament, Ana Brnabić, is a member of the LGBTQI+ community. However, Brnabić has not prioritized LGBTQI+ rights and has contributed to further devaluing the LGBTQI+ cause in Serbia. It is important to note also that even though the attitudes of several far-right parties have evolved on the same-sex marriage front, most remain strongly conservative on many other fronts, such as adoption rights for gay couples or surrogacy. Moreover, more radical parties and movements are less likely to adopt this apparent tolerant outlook towards LGBTQI+ rights and still retain a strong opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, even to same-sex marriage. For Eric Zemmour of Reconquête, "marriage, is between a man and woman. It's an institution" – quite similar statements can be found with AfD members for instance – and same-sex marriage is seen as paving the way to surrogacy and other perceived excesses.
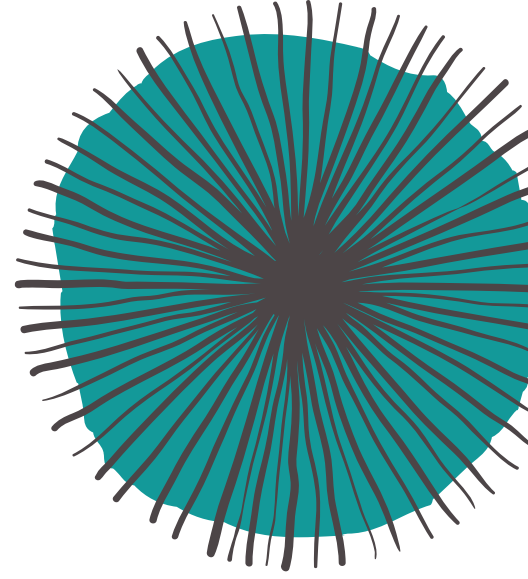
In the past few years, the far-right parties' opposition to LGBTQ+ rights has increasingly been targeting **transgender rights**, evident in the production and mediatisation of a "moral panic" on the topic. In Finland, the Finns Party opposed very strongly the trans law voted in 2023. Similarly in France, the Rassemblement National shows a strong reluctance towards transgenders rights, for instance by proposing in 2023 a law to forbid transgender athletes to compete. In 2024, six LGBTQI+ associations filed a complaint against former Reconquête Marion Maréchal for transphobic slurs. The same phenomena can be witnessed in Spain where the far-right party Vox together with the PP have strongly opposed the so-called Trans Law passed by the Spanish socialist government in 2022 which recognises, among other rights, gender self-determination.

Additionally, in many other European countries, anti-feminist narratives are giving way to **anti-trans narratives**, which are being supported by certain sectors of feminism, particularly by women who were involved in the feminist movement in the 1970s and who now identify as "radical feminists" or TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists). In France, feminists like Élisabeth Badinter and Caroline Fourest refer to a "transgenderist" ideology, which they believe undermines biological women's rights. In this category, we can also find authors like Dora Moutot and Marguerite Stern – former Femen activist – as well as the self-proclaimed feminist collective Némésis that maintains clear links with the far right. The conflict between trans-inclusive and trans-exclusionary radical feminists has also recently erupted in the post-Yugoslav space as well (Pan, 2023).
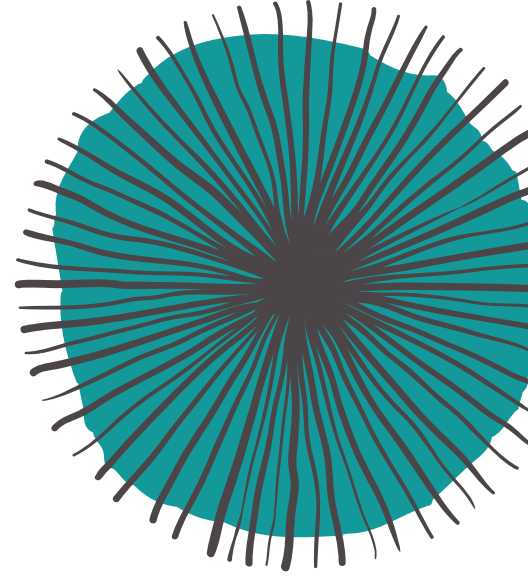
Finally, it is also crucial to highlight that in many of the countries studied in this report, **LGBTQI+ rights** have been recently either criticised, attacked or reduced during the past few years. In Hungary, the 2022 Act LXXIX aimed at protecting children from paedophilia was heavily criticised for stigmatising LGBTQI+ individuals. In Poland, where LGBTQI+ rights are already among the least respected in Europe, some municipalities and regions have created "LGBT-free zones" since 2020, with the last zone being repealed in 2024. In Italy, we can also witness worrying developments as Meloni's government has been taking a hard line aiming at limiting the rights of same-sex couples. For instance, the Italian parliament approved in 2023 a bill aiming at criminalising overseas surrogacy under the pretext that this reproductive technique is mostly used by same-sex couples even though in more than half of the cases it is used by heterosexual couples. Legislative efforts to halt the registration of children of same-sex couples have also been initiated, and some Italian cities have already begun removing the names of non-biological mothers from the birth certificates of children born into same-sex relationships.

Extremist anti-gender narratives and religion

Religion has historically played a significant role in shaping extremist gender-related narratives on two levels: using religious values as a means of mobilisation and leveraging the Church as an institution to influence public debates on gender-related issues. The focus has often been on abortion rights and reproductive rights in general, on LGBTQI+ rights, and on the defence of the above-mentioned "natural" order between sexes.
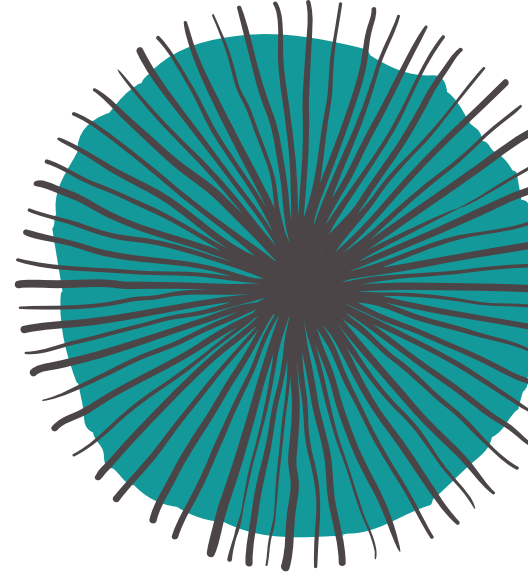
References to **Christian values** can be found in various contemporary far-right parties. For instance, in Spain, Vox defends catholic traditional family values and the "natural order" with regard to gender and gender roles. During a meeting in 2019 between Spanish Vox and Polish PiS, politician Kosma Złotowski stated "We want to defend Christian values jointly with Vox in the European Parliament", while Santiago Abascal vowed for a Europe "based on respect for the sovereignty of its States and Christian cultural roots". In France, Eric Zemmour and Marion Maréchal claim to defend Christian values and a traditional family model, in a similar fashion as Viktor Orbán in Hungary. The AfD has also emphasised Germany's "Christian traditions" and "Judeo-Christian identity" - as part of the "Western culture" (Abendland) in connection with traditional family values and gender roles.

The role of the Church – as an institution – of course, varies depending on the national context and on the religion. The role of the Church has been and still is more prevalent in Catholic countries. In Spain, Italy,

Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and Croatia, the Catholic Church has influenced for many decades discussions on gender in general and on LGBTQI+ rights and abortion rights in particular. Of course, the Vatican has had a strong influence – and remains influential – and has articulated narratives aimed at preventing the denaturalisation of the family and the degendering of social relations. Despite being seen as relatively progressive, Pope Francis has been the most significant institutionaliser of **anti-gender politics** in Italy. For instance, in 2016, his declaration of the doctrine of faith (*Amoris Laetitia*) included an entire paragraph warning about the dangers of gender theory. Some churches have also openly supported anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQI+ campaigns, such as the Slovenian Catholic Church but also the Serbian Orthodox Church. For example, Mitropolit Amfilohije Radović – the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church – opposed the Pride march of 2009 and employed a contentious metaphor to attack same-sex relationships, arguing that "a tree that bears no fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire".

Anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQI+ mobilisations have been linked to or supported by the Church and various types of religious organisations. As mentioned earlier, a variety of "Marches for Life" have been observed throughout Europe for decades, often with more or less official ties to the Church. These mobilisations can take different forms, for instance in Croatia, groups of ultra catholic men, such as Muževni Budite (Be Manly) or Klečavci (The Kneelers), have been praying in public places and advocating against abortion, for the restoration of male authority and women's modesty and chastity. In Croatia, sociologist and leader of the ultra-Catholic association Vigilare, Vice John Batarelo, has participated in these events and is also connected to the Croatian branch of the Polish extremist organization Ordo Iuris, which played a key role in the opposition to abortion rights in Poland. In contrast, in some countries, such as Finland, the Church has actually been targeted by the far right for being seen as overly supportive of "rainbow" and "woke" ideology, for instance, due to their participation in events such as the Pride Parade.
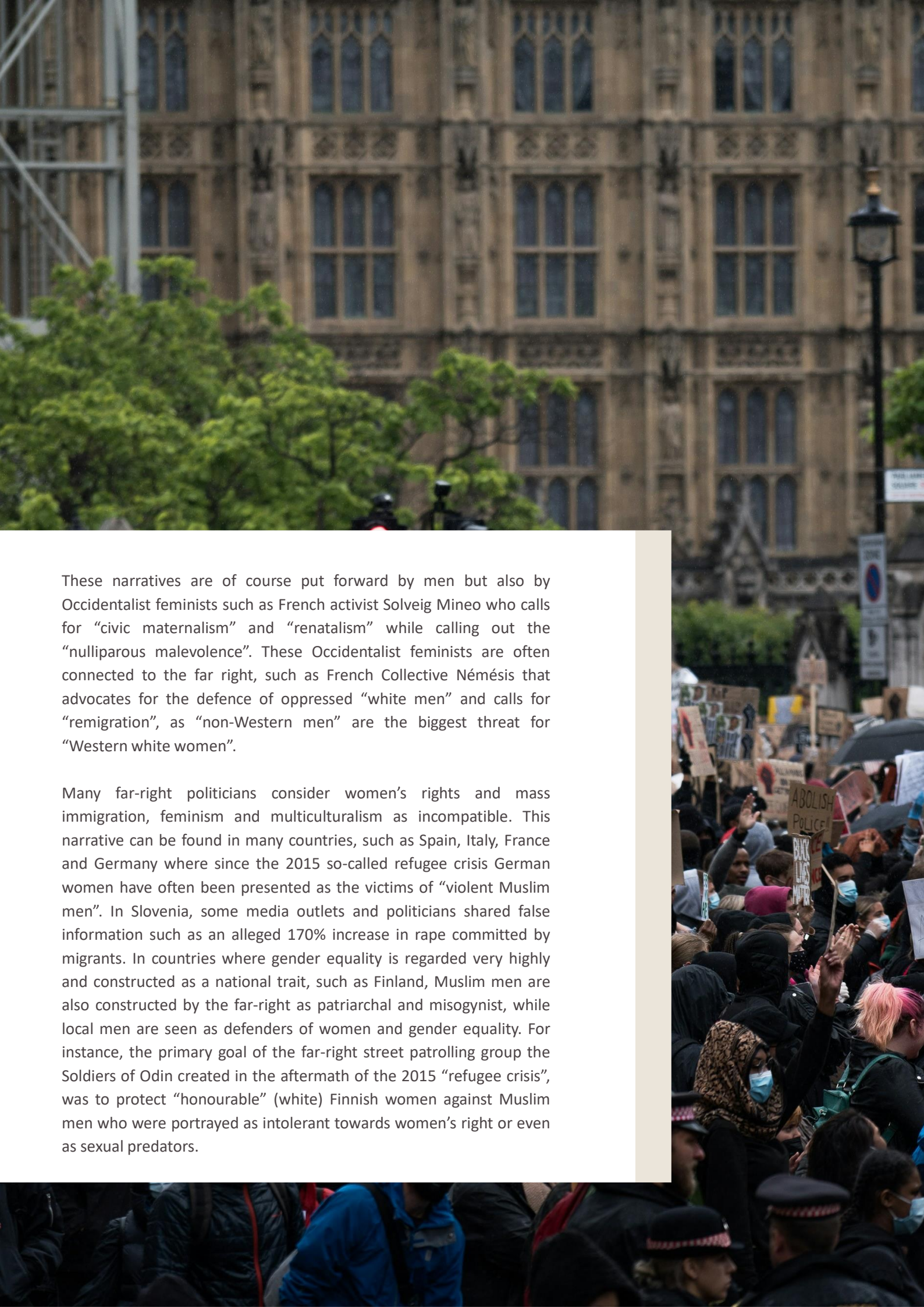
Gender and anti-immigration narratives

As our report illustrates, another hallmark of extremist anti-gender narratives prevalent in many of the countries examined is the promotion of motherhood and advocacy for a return to traditional gender roles. The **emphasis on motherhood** has persisted in political and social discourses since the 19th and 20th centuries. These narratives, rooted in racist and biologistic notions of nationhood, are closely linked to the formation of modern nation-states. They uphold women's roles as conveyors of national values and guardians of national identity against external threats. Extremist anti-gender narratives are reviving many of these ideas to stigmatise immigrant populations and advocate for increasingly stringent anti-immigration policies.

Some narratives put forward by the far right portray motherhood as a means to counter the perceived threat of mostly non-white immigration (see femonationalism: Farris, 2017). **The Great Replacement conspiracy theory** has clear gender-based elements: the white population is being replaced by a non-white and Muslim population and one way to counter this invasion is to have as many (white) children as possible. This theory in its current form has been developed by French far-right thinker Renaud Camus in 2010 – and recycled by Eric Zemmour – but is rooted in theories that originated in the 19th century and were adopted by the French Nouvelle Droite (New Right) in the 1970s.

For instance, in Spain the historical notion of the *mujer de valor* (woman of worth) is being utilised by the far right: a good honourable Spanish woman will contribute to the country's survival by making (white) children. In Germany, this narrative can be traced back to the National Socialist period when women had the duty to reproduce for the preservation of the *Volk* (the race). In the case of Italy, Mussolini's fascist regime defended and imposed similar narratives and policies, centred on the birth rate and increasing demographics. And in a similar way the current far right, and Meloni's government itself, defends birth policies against a supposed "invasion" of migrants. Also, in this case, there are transnational networks that spread these narratives all over the world, such as the Budapest Demographic Summit.

The idea of **population replacement** is complemented by population reduction: women must have more children to counter the demographic decline of the nation. In Croatia and Serbia, but also in Italy, these narratives are evident: over the past 30 years, but particularly in the last decade, significant emigration has occurred. This situation often leads to assertions that national issues can be solved by increasing childbirth rates. However, behind this **pronatalism**, we can see a clear political agenda, for instance within the white supremacist movements. For radical pronatalists, having more children is a societal imperative, not an individual choice and is offered as a response to saving our civilisation from disintegration. Women are also blamed for being selfish by not having enough children, hence not fulfilling their "duty" and contributing to the decline of our nations. "Western women" who "mix" their blood with foreign men are also targeted by the far right and considered as "traitors". For instance, Jukka Hankamäki, a former Finns Party candidate criticises in 2020 "cross-border mating" and considers that women mate with foreigners to take revenge on Finnish society.

These narratives are of course put forward by men but also by Occidentalist feminists such as French activist Solveig Mineo who calls for "civic maternalism" and "renatalism" while calling out the "nulliparous malevolence". These Occidentalist feminists are often connected to the far right, such as French Collective Némésis that advocates for the defence of oppressed "white men" and calls for "remigration", as "non-Western men" are the biggest threat for "Western white women".

Many far-right politicians consider women's rights and mass immigration, feminism and multiculturalism as incompatible. This narrative can be found in many countries, such as Spain, Italy, France and Germany where since the 2015 so-called refugee crisis German women have often been presented as the victims of "violent Muslim men". In Slovenia, some media outlets and politicians shared false information such as an alleged 170% increase in rape committed by migrants. In countries where gender equality is regarded very highly and constructed as a national trait, such as Finland, Muslim men are also constructed by the far-right as patriarchal and misogynist, while local men are seen as defenders of women and gender equality. For instance, the primary goal of the far-right street patrolling group the Soldiers of Odin created in the aftermath of the 2015 "refugee crisis", was to protect "honourable" (white) Finnish women against Muslim men who were portrayed as intolerant towards women's right or even as sexual predators.
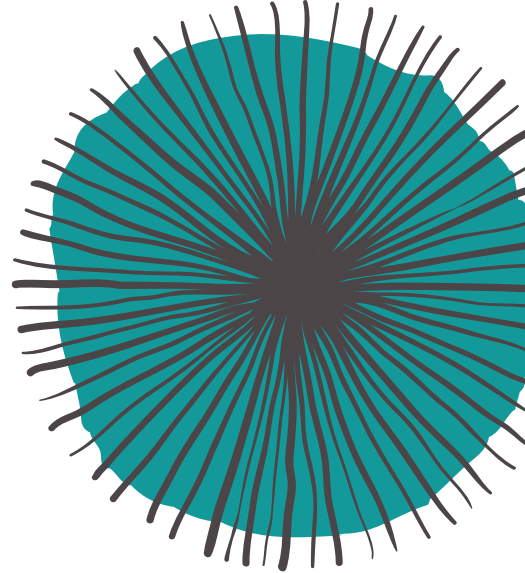
Conclusion

Today's extremist anti-gender narratives can be understood as **counter-narratives or counter-movements** that oppose the feminist and progressive advances and recognition of LGBTQI+ rights that have taken place in Europe over the last 50 years. Extremist anti-gender narratives are articulated around the creation of a series of threats to create a sense of insecurity in society. This strategy facilitates the acceptance of measures against the legal developments we have outlined in the report.

On the other hand, extremist anti-gender narratives are often intertwined with other types of extremist narratives of a racist or xenophobic nature. Mediatisation, the influence of social networks and the spread of fake news and the rise of the far right are other key elements in understanding the rise of extremist anti-gender narratives and their acceptance in part of society.

Finally, while extremist anti-gender narratives are mostly propagated by far-right, conservative and radical religious groups, actors from other political spectrums are also adopting such narratives. This shows the need to study extremist anti-gender narratives from multiple perspectives to consider their complexity.

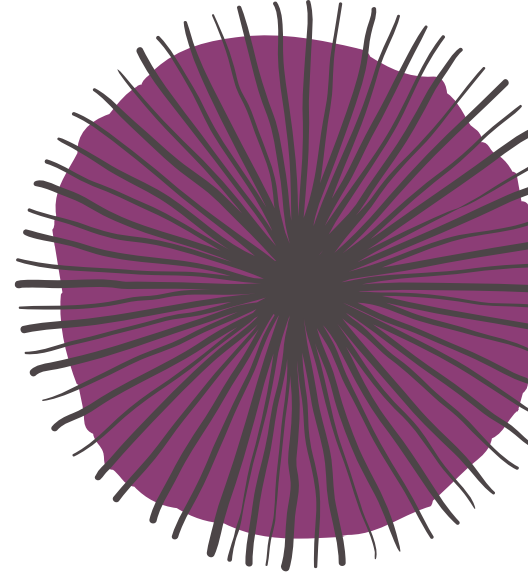# 05 | HISTORICAL ROOTS OF EXTREMIST NARRATIVES: SCIENCE
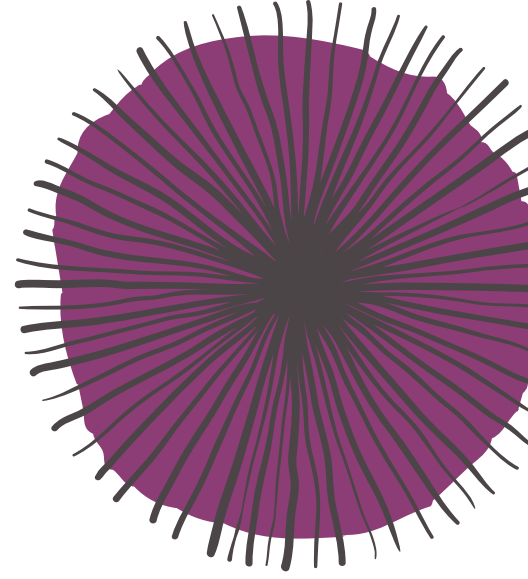
Executive summary

The perception of science, its socio-political significance, content requirements, institutional basis, and even reflection on individual scholars have been always embedded in the greater project of state-building and nation-building. The nation is also the key concept to understanding such sub-systems as science, its organisation and content. Political and public attitudes were influenced by the fact of how well certain core values of national identity were addressed by scientific inquiry. The common feature of what we call far-right parties, illiberal civil groups and movements is that they take advantage of the different forms of nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and EU scepticism. From this perspective, the focus and results of scholarly endeavour are estimated according to how well they support or weaken the extremist cause.

Because of the close interlinkage with the national agenda, it is inevitable that there are some overlaps of subjects with other sections. Whereas the connection to the report on the nation, based on the above-mentioned, is rather obvious, gender issues are also deeply ingrained in science-related debates. Gender-attitudes governed by perceptions of nature, biology and demography are occurring in most reflections. These overlaps, nevertheless, are explored in this section from the angle of **scientific discourse**, bringing hence perhaps added elements to these highly important and societally central subjects.

In this report, the discussion about the historical roots of current debates regarding science is structured to point out the underlying common European narrative trends and their anchorage to relevant past discourses. These are further elaborated by distinguishing the various national versions of the same themes and tropes. The main argument of this section is that in addition to the apparent historical continuities and the prevailing joint features not only testifies about the circulation of narratives – in time and space – but more importantly shows how the common topics are adjusted and interpreted/translated to the national political-cultural contexts, by which more nuances and meanings are created.

Technically, bringing more light to the different national examples is referred to mostly as "national cases", but the parties and movements are introduced at first mention. However, individual politicians are, as a rule, not mentioned, due to the limited space of the section.

Introduction

The positioning of science is entrenched in a historical evolution of two main intellectual-ideological trends of the 19th century that had a tremendous impact on the evaluation of science. The rise of nationalism was influential in those states where creating a modern state was an urgent issue. The German and Italian unification process, the independence dreams of the smaller states of Finland, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and Croatia under the Habsburg and Russian empires – all needed to harness science for their nation-building project. Hence, the thematical selection and orientation of science was to serve national goals and develop the science in national languages to be accessible for the national resurrection. The traces can be detected today; funding is allocated to research that is aligned with the national interest, and interpreted by the powerholders.

Criticism of **modernity**, and the role of science and rationality, was another trend that shaped the reception of science. There is a new intellectual stream of thought emerging in the early 19th century: Romanticism. Romanticism as a counter-Enlightenment movement, emphasised emotions, religion, mysticism, and mythology instead of rationality. Romanticism also questioned the outcome of the French Revolution, the citizen-nation concept, and offered instead the so-called *Volksgeist* or *Nationalgeist* tradition, which is often referred to by its main theorists Herder and Savigny. The spirit of the nation not only provided the core of ethnic identity, but it referred also to a natural or indigenous knowledge embedded in the national character. This was perhaps the first "emotional turn" of social sciences. The traces of Romanticism can be detected in contemporary refuting of scientific knowledge.

The trend of raising emotions to the centre of attention was reinforced also in the second half of the 19th century by industrial and technological revolutions. New scientific achievements and technological innovations became increasingly incomprehensible for most of the people. This led, on the one hand, to a growing breach of communication between scholars and the people. While literacy grew across Europe, nevertheless, science was less and less seen as connected to practically applicable knowledge and from the early 20th century science was often referred to as an ivory tower activity, detached from life.

Discourse on science from a comparative perspective

We can detect several common characteristics regarding the attitudes to and politics of science in our target area. Science in this report entails equally social sciences and humanities, physical and life sciences as well. The nation-building and national identity-related processes are inevitably embedded in the science of history.
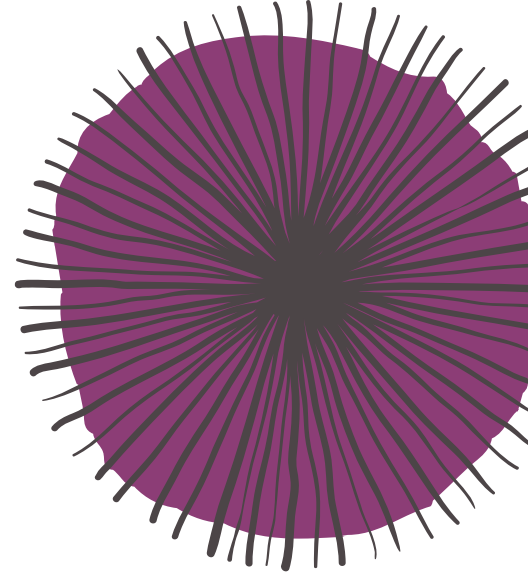
The role of nature in perceiving science

Nature is one of the central tropes connected to the argument of the naturality of the true national existence. Nature is seen as a source of proving the purity of the core values of a community. Nature is juxtaposed to new global technological advancements to emphasise the superiority of the simple life that only the countryside habitation can offer. This notion is emerging also regarding how nature represents the natural order of things in societal order and especially liberal, all-embracing values. These conceptions are reminding of the 18th century Rousseauan "Back to Nature"-though, claiming that the sinful and artificial society corrupts people therefore they should turn away from it.

Similarly, these goals resemble with 19th century German idea where the **glorification of nature** is linked to the concept of *Heimat* (homeland) and where the right to the land was thought to be inherited by the bloodline (*Blut-und-Boden* ideology). Nature was also the ultimate source of health in the German-speaking countries late 19th – early 20th century. The Lebensreform movement advocated that urbanization and industrialization derailed life from its natural environment therefore people should seek naturalism, vegetarianism and natural medicine (Fritzen 2006). Although not all the supporters of this movement were or became extremists the glorification of nature was not systematically linked to the *Blut-und-Boden* ideology. However, there were connections between the naturopathic trends, the early vaccination movements and the national socialist movement, especially in the beginning.
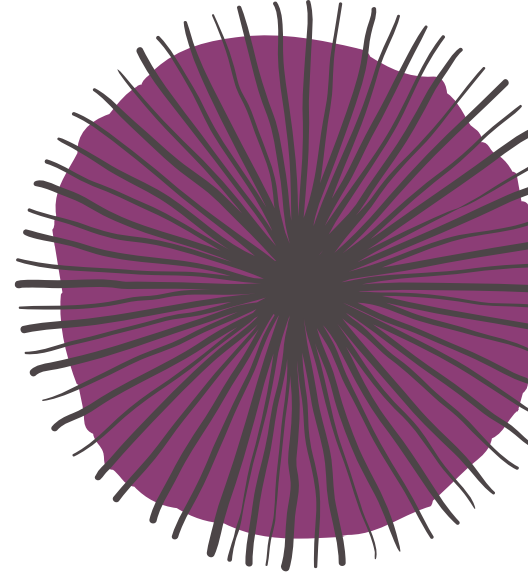
Glorifying nature can be detected also in Finland, in most of the right-of-centre parties but particularly in the ethnonationalist Perussuomalaiset (Finns Party, PS) and the far-right Sinimusta Liike (Blue-and-Black Movement, SL). Here a romanticized and aestheticized image of nature is maintained as a signifier of the "true" Finnish identity that is interlinked with the conception of an ideal space for the nation. The Finns party translated its name for international representation as the "True Finns" which was rebuked by other Finnish parties, naturally. The ethnonationalist culture and traditions are rooted in nature; thus, it is seen as the core of national heritage, thus nature is inevitable for the nation's continuity.

In the Italian conception, since the time of fascist dictatorship in the interwar years and nowadays in neofascist parties such as CasaPound Italia (CasaPound Italy, CPI) and Forza Nuova (New Force, FN), nature is perceived as a localized space, situated to the countryside. Agricultural activity and peasant life preserve the genuine values and true nature of the nation. The saving forests campaign is linked to saving the countryside which symbolises the idea of nature. Spatiality plays a central role in the Italian evaluation of science, which is institutionally based in the urban liberal surroundings. In the Italian conception, the Herderian idea to preserve the soul of the nation is resurfacing where the soul conserves the purest traditions and ideals. Also, in parties such as the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN), now Lega per Salvini (League for Salvini, LpS), or Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) we find this conception in the background, although less radical compared to the neo-fascist parties mentioned above.

In the Finnish and Italian understanding, pure knowledge can be found in nature. This resembles also the Slovenian neo-pagan narrative that science is an artificial construction and hence cannot bring wisdom. The true knowledge was taken away by the growing distance of people from their natural habitat. Hence, promoting natural immune responses instead of taking the vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic, or healing by eating the right food or nursing by natural methods, were some practical examples of the same idea (Naravna Imunost). Similarly, in Germany, the century-old Lebensreform-movement's ideas resurfaced in their radical form during the Covid-crisis in the Querdenker scene, which rejected vaccination. Besides, the *Blut-und-Boden* ideology is still at the root of a party like Die Heimat (formerly NPD) and other groups who try to create "völkisch" communities in the countryside. The combination of neopaganism, glorification of nature and *völkisch* ideology forms the core of the Anastasia movement, which originates from Russia and is currently monitored by the German Federal Office for the protection of the Constitution.

Nature represents a model for social order, **the natural order of things**. In contrast to the traditional Finnish concept of nature, which represents traditionally also the equal standing of the Finns, the Italian countryside refers to a hierarchically organised conservative society. In both cases, the revitalisation of the nation, and the new force come from the countryside close to nature.

Scientific rebuttals about gender in extremist parties in Finland (PS, SL), Germany (Alternative für Deutschland: Alternative for Germany, AfD; Die Heimat: the Homeland), Hungary (Fidesz; Mi Hazánk: Our Homeland, MH), Italy (CPI, FN, LpS, FdI) and Poland (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość: Law and Justice, PiS; Konföderatsija: Confederation, KO) rely on what is natural or unnatural. This conception provides an argument for re-establishing hierarchical structures by referring to "biology". As we can learn also from the gender section of this report, women are biologically different from men; hence they have different roles in society. Homosexuality is against nature and transsexuality is an artificial construction. The so-called gender-ideology is criticised in Poland and Hungary not only by referring to traditionalism but also in connection to the demography crisis, as interfering with the biological or "normal" recreation processes. Yet, gender studies are terminated only in Hungary. In Germany AfD, Die Heimat and "Demo für Alle" members argue that "gender mainstreaming" is downright against nature. Christina Baum, a member of the AfD, warned even against the "de-biologisation" of parenthood.

In Slovenia, generic values contain a healthy and simple life of athletic, religious, and rural existence that embraces traditional family and gender roles with a firm stand against abortion. This perception is rooted in the 19th-century Slovene political slogan "each to identify with one's own people" ("svoji k svojim") serving as a political goal to separate, purify and protect the true Slovene nation from the surrounding mixed ethnic population (Jezernik, 2008; Cucek, 2016).

The Slovene perceptions correlate with the Finnish far-right concept of true nation is ethnically healthy because it is homogeneous and thus has a close historical symbiosis with nature. So, other ethnicities are potentially unhealthy and even can spread diseases. This was a strong argument in the Hungarian Fidesz and MH and Polish government PiS and KO parties in 2015, but also Italian LN/LpS, when opposing migration from the Middle East and Africa.

This idea is rooted in the 1930s **eugenics** that targeted the sterilization of the "inferior" people, Lapps in Finland. Eugenics and the anthropological inquiry of the Aryan race was an interwar period scientific trend in Germany. Scientific inquiry in the 1930s focused on distinguishing "outsider and inferior" Jews and Roma and isolating them from the Aryan German society. While the German National Socialist radicalized eugenics, nevertheless, anthropological examination of "natural differences" has a longer colonial history in the 19th century interlinked with the societal impact of Charles Darwin. Social Darwinism later became influential especially in the post-communist countries during the neoliberal market-centred transition where social support systems were run down implicating that the strong individuals would survive by adjusting to fast changes (Dragoman, 2015).

As explained in the Nation section, the national purity concept, resembling and rooted in these above-mentioned historical examples, is widely shared in the Finnish (and Nordic) far-right circles, in Hungary (Fidesz, MH), using images of bloodline as the ultimate birthright to the national homeland, resembling with the *Blut-und-Boden* ideology. In Germany, while the Die Heimat and numerous groups of the neo-Nazi scene are closer to this understanding, nevertheless, the AfD in its official statements still blurs the boundary between the cultural and biological conceptions of the nation.

In the European extremist narratives, nature is the ultimate source of the core values and purity of the nation, the ideal home, health and strength of the people, and genuine uncorrupted knowledge. At the same time, **climate change denialism** is an equally common and firmly established attitude in these circles. Climate change is understood as a globalist, non-national phenomenon, which should be rejected.
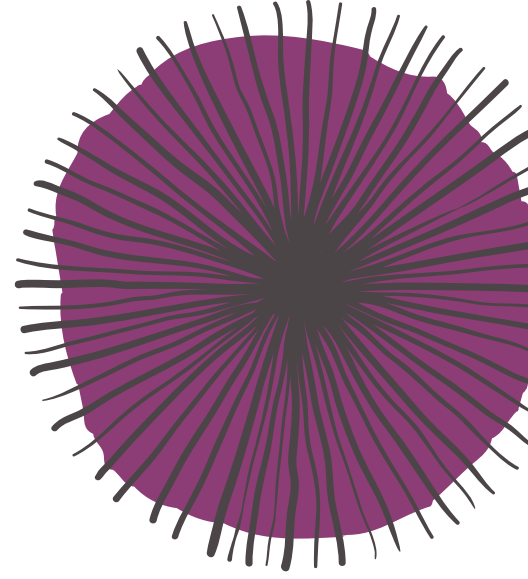
The validity of national science

In most of our research countries, the general view is that since science is characteristically internationally anchored, therefore it is undoubtedly untrustworthy. In the anti-Spain concept, this attitude is linked to the idea that leftist advocates are prioritising transnational/global agenda that inevitably runs counter with the national interest. This view resembles Hungarian and Polish perspectives, according to which science is non-national, global, and liberal, and hence its results ought to be false, harmful and/or useless. Furthermore, as in the Italian case, the soulless global and liberal characteristics of science are irresponsible and dangerous, and technological advancement threatens human existence. Therefore, scientific endeavour should be nationally anchored.

For Spain, national interest requires **national science** that supports Spanish enterprises, especially the farmers of the countryside. For example, Vox harshly attacks the United Nations 2030 Agenda, considered "one of the greatest threats to the survival of the Spanish nation". The same type of international topic, climate change denialism is adopted and domesticated, and anchored to the idea of traditional France. Marine Le Pen, in her presidential election campaign in 2017, advocated the idea of sustainable France ("La France durable"). She linked environmental protection to ethnonationalism and traditional French values. This idea was later reframed as "patriotic ecology" by the French far-right Rassemblement National (RN) (see Forchtner, 2020).

Similarly, the German evaluation of and attitude to science is dependent on metanarratives circling around the protection of the nation (also the German people, the "Volk", and its culture) from the various dangers. One of the central threats to the national community is gender ideology furthered by gender studies. Another threat is caused by migration and consequently, the European demand for ethnopluralism which has an impact on how migration research and/or studies of integration are perceived. In Poland and Hungary, migration studies have been increasingly monitored since the 2015 "refugee crisis" that brought about the discourse on the historical significance of Christianity for the national identity. In Hungary, migration studies are carried out in state-controlled research institutions.

In countries where religious faith is interlinked with the nation-concept as in France, Poland, Serbia and Croatia, Catholicism, spiritual and pro-life conservative movements have a decisive effect on the opposition to gender studies.
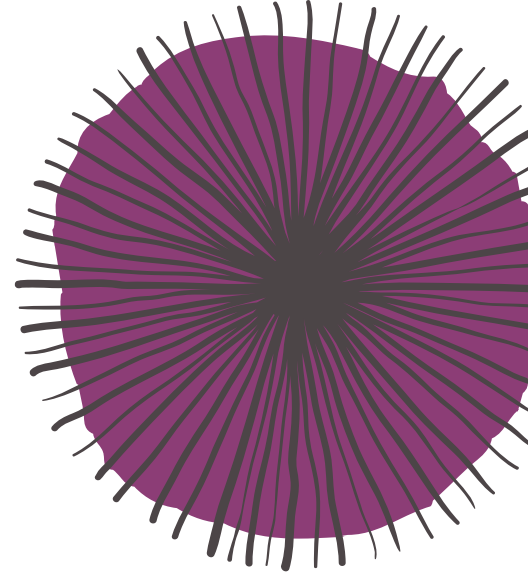
There is also a common feature of a mobilisation effort for protecting national integrity against the political consequences of transnational European scientific results. This attitude emerged particularly in the anti-vax movement that opposed the European vaccine policy ("Plandemia") where vaccines were gained and distributed by the EU (Knight and Butter, 2023; Miklóssy, 2024). It is a juxtaposition of national forces and the "centralisation effort" of Brussels bureaucrats where science is a pretext for the nationalists' claim. From this perspective, similar types of movements can feed on the anti-vax agenda: protecting whatever national interest against scientifically based transnational arguments (Campolongo, Scanni and Tarditi, 2024; Raffini and Penalva-Verdú, 2022; Lehmann and Zehtner, 2022).

In addition, in Covid confinements, transnational decision-making over national power is often connected to the indirect criticism of liberals and leftwing politics as their ideologies are identified with the international agenda. This is connected to **criticism of globalist elites** that requires the democratic defence of the people as articulated in the extremist narratives in Hungary, Poland and Germany. In Slovenia for example behind the anti-vax narrative, we can find arguments stressing the significance of national independence in opposing anti-globalisation/ anti-transnational influences but also in relation to EU integration that is conceived instead as the primary arena for driving national interest.
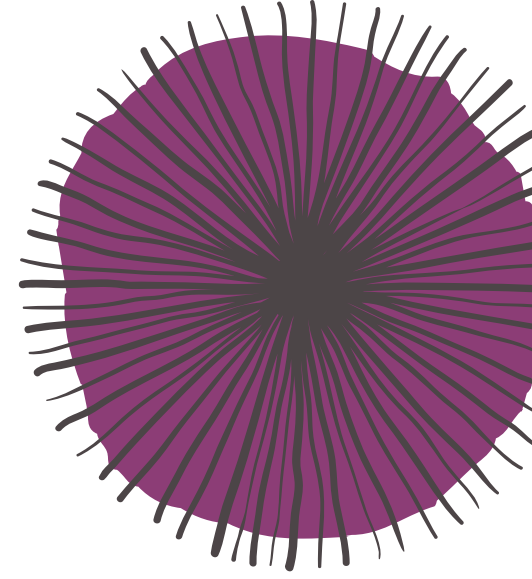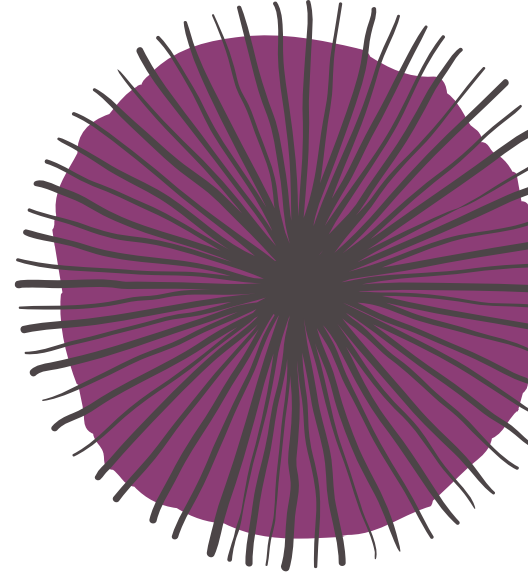
Distrust in institutionalised science

Citizens' distrust in government, institutions and central authorities has been an ever-strengthening and widespread phenomenon across Europe, with grave consequences on democracy (Rosanvallon, 2008; Muro and Vidal, 2016; Bertsou, 2019). **Distrust** in state institutions often overshadows academia that is maintained by the public budget. A special case of this phenomenon can be found in the Eastern flank of the EU (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, and Poland) but also in the East German regions, which is partly due to the 40-year communist legacy. Ideologically monitored and organised scholarly activities, limitations on the dissemination and public appearance of research results, authoritarian academic education, and strictly defined interpretations of history – all bore consequences on later attitudes to social sciences and humanities, in particular. Since the practical conduct of these sciences is structured around universities and research institutes, they are often seen as politically tainted as instruments of some underlying ideological apparatus anchored to certain political forces.

Distrust, on the other hand, is partly rooted in the difficult process of post-communist transition and the neoliberal drive of building a market-based society. This process was claimed to rely on the scientific basis of economic models aiming to bring welfare to the people. Particularly in the 1990s a severe drop in the standard of living, social polarisation, and emerging poverty – unexperienced before 1989 – undermined the belief in scientifically based political arguments.

In many countries, **natural sciences** are perceived as more trustworthy than social sciences as they are assumed to be non-ideological and non-political. In addition, natural sciences are producing "practical" results to be more easily implemented in everyday life than shabby and useless social sciences, which are just "reinventing the wheel".

The general distrust in institutions is reflected in science because it is seen as an institution itself, partly due to the institution-funded background of scientific activities. Countries that gained independence after the end of the Cold War, such as the Slovenes and Croats, have strong opposition to institutions because for many centuries these were not nationally anchored, Slovene or Croatian (Kaase and Newton, 1999). In addition, the neoliberal post-communist transition brought about a gradually strengthening individualist culture with grave consequences on the perceptions of knowledge production. In these understandings, there are no general truths about the world or society, but every person has their own idea of how things and life work. These in certain segments can overlap with a group of people, nevertheless, they never overlap with everyone. Furthermore, there is also a disillusionment of science as a promise of societal improvement, equality and fairness in life, and solutions of central problems of human existence.

Selective agency: science by the scientists' background

In extremist narratives, scientific research results are individualized as researchers' works and thus evaluated by assumed ideological background, political worldviews, and activism that scientists might possess. Hence, the perceptions of various fields of science are dependent on the agency of science. Agency however may "overshadow" the academic institutions and/or research programs, projects they are engaged in and that finance their work.
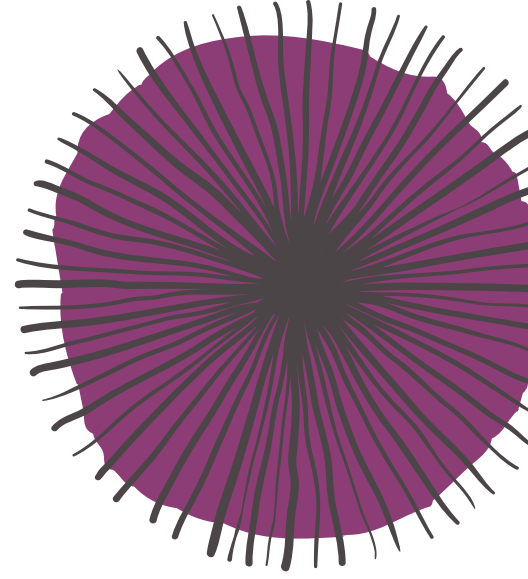
Epistemic battle is launched against the so-called leftist and liberal scientists who are presented as a threat because they are allegedly questioning traditional values and moral perceptions. In Italy, the leader of the Lega, Matteo Salvini, has repeatedly mocked the so-called "professoroni" ("big professors"), referring to experts and scientists accused of being left-wing only for their knowledge and positions. Furthermore, in the French context, we find examples in the fields of biology and medicine where real clashes of legitimacy between scientists erupt, as in the case of Didier Raoult, which then spill over into the digital world, with online communities discussing the matter, igniting polemics and controversies (Longhi, 2022).

Climate change denialism and discursive **anti-environmentalism** are counterarguments opposing "liberal science" and its left-green "climate fanatics" in Finland, Hungary and Poland. The Finnish extremists reject scientific results if they conflict with the far right's own worldview and values on climate change, vaccination, gender, social sciences and humanities. Research about racism, gender studies, immigration and development studies are considered useless and are ridiculed. In the French perceptions, science is seemingly just a part of the overall concern about the degeneration of society that the left wing brought about. Anti-Spain discourse circles around the agency of science. Because ecology and environment-related issues are identified with left-wing and liberal scientists their results are ruled out as non-science. Similarly, the German AfD question the validity of gender studies as science.

"Non-science" attitude is also related to gender studies. Furthermore, female scientists are targeted in most of our studied countries – even in "egalitarian" countries such as Finland –not only on their scientific results but also because of their gender. The threats they receive might vary regarding the different subjects they are involved with but often include gender-based components.

The prolonged European financial crisis, launched in 2008, brought up great debates about the "mistaken" national economic policies in Slovenia, Hungary, Poland, Finland, Italy and Germany. Criticism circled around research-based economic models where liberals were accused of rigid market-driven perceptions, and the left-wing advocating neo-Keynesian massive state-involvement and debt-friendliness. These were and still are opposed to national protectionism.

Culture war

The culture war can relate either to an ideological battle or to institutional take-over and institution-building. In both processes, the aim is to marginalize politically unsuitable actors, such as researchers, or leaders of academic institutions, think tanks, and drive censorship of scientific knowledge. The culture war is also set into a wider international context to bring more weight to the argument and show the universal characteristic of the endeavour. As the common feature in all target countries, liberalism is paired with cultural Marxism and leftist ideology that result in a hegemonic **woke or cancel culture**, limiting the freedom of speech.
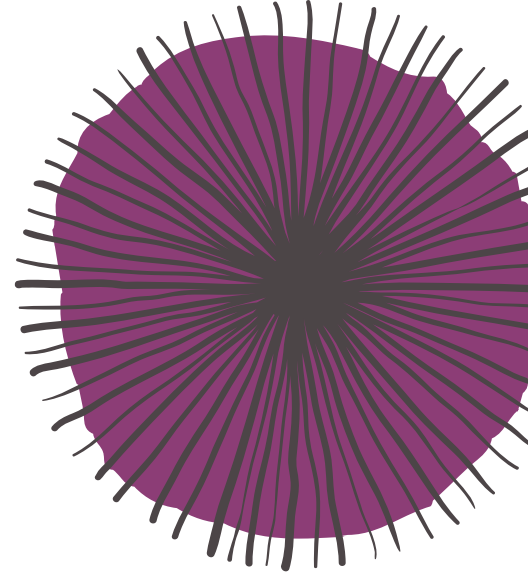
In France, not only the far right (RN) but also conservative politicians use the sarcastic label of "woke culture" to characterize the decadent leftist stand. The claim is that wokism is emerging in academia and therefore culture war must be waged against the left-wing scientists. Leftism is set in opposition to French national and transnational European identity, which needs to be revisited. Europe, as Christian and united, must be defended against its old enemies of the past, the communists of the Cold War, and the "Islamic barbarians". Even the French conservatives allied already in 2021 with the notion of "**Islamo-gauchisme**", meaning the alliance of leftists with the cause of Muslims, that was polluting French universities. Later these ideas developed into the great replacement theory, a danger that is driven by left-wing academics for the benefit of the Muslim "barbarians". Interestingly, Catholic and traditional France is perceived not as juxtaposed but as closely connected to Europe, as its leading nation.

In Germany according to the AfD, "woke ideology" and "cultural Marxism" are examples of the global hegemonic cultural project, which is why the waging of an all-around culture war against the left wing in the political sphere as well as in academia is required. In the context of gender studies, for instance, the necessity is to fight "gender terror". There is a direct consequence of gender studies on the primary reproductive unit of the nation, the family, which must be protected in times of demographic crisis.

In Hungary and Poland, the role of science is to safeguard the ideal national community. In this endeavour "culture war" is waged against the liberal forces and in Hungary the left wing, which is almost non-existent in the Polish context. The culture war is carried out mainly by weakening the institutional basis of politically unsuitable scientific knowledge (Miklóssy, 2021). In Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, but also Italy, a culture war was waged against the left also by declaring that Communism was similarly evil as Nazism. Since most modern left-wing parties are successors of the Communist parties, the criminalization of communism was a powerful argument of what people should remember.

In the Eastern members of the EU, especially in Slovenia, Hungary, and Poland, there has been a special argumentative culture war emerging. The dawn of Western civilization has been predicted and publicly articulated since 2014. The erosion of the Western liberal era as a marker of civilisation is seen as corrupted by the essential liberal manifestations of the LGBTQ+ phenomenon, environmentalism, multiculturalism and woke culture. Against this trend Slovenia, Hungary and Poland should fight because this attacks the core national values but also European Christian civilisation.
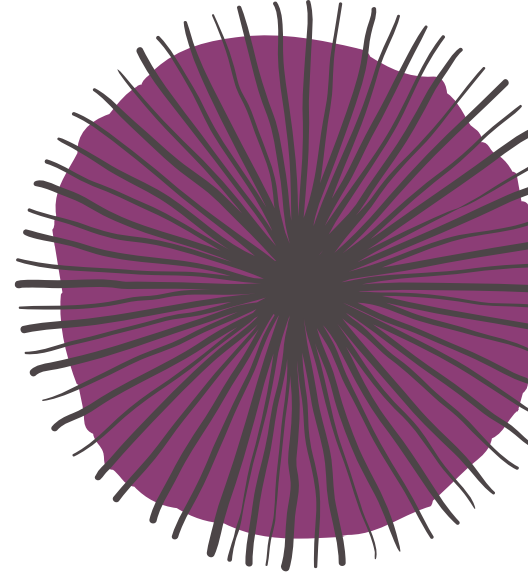
History science

Social sciences and humanities are to testify the virtues and societal values of the political community of the nation, in general. **The science of history**, however, has a particularly important role in current extremist discourses because historical interpretations are used to strengthen national identity, as explained in the section discussing Nation in this report. This equally relies on the origin myth as the past greatness and heroism of the nation to be recognized and remembered. Shared vision of the glorious past provides a powerful argument for the pedigree and continuity of the community. Only by addressing the *long durée* historical existence would there be a reliable promise of the ever so brilliant future for any nation.

Since the ideal national community in the extremist narratives are earmarked around values such as conservatism, traditionalism, nationalism and Christianity, the common historical reference point is in the interwar period. In this regard, most cases are also concerned with whitewashing the contested moments and traumatic events of this era. Central subject is how to deal with the concept of guilt in contrast to interpretations of the heroic or victim image of the nation.

In France there is a political purpose to reinterpret previous official history narratives. The goal is to renegotiate what is "guilt" regarding past events of imperial history, holocaust, and Vichy. In Germany, the will to restore a supposedly "true" historical knowledge – as opposed to the "official" memory culture in the German Federal Republic – has been an important aspect for extremist stakeholders since 1945. Historical revisionism resurfaces in contemporary debates on the necessities of a more positive interpretations of the past, especially downplaying "guilt cult" (Die Heimat) and the crimes committed by the Germans during the National Socialist period and demanding a "turnaround" in memory politics (Bjorn Höcke, AfD). Also, some core historical events, such as the peaceful revolution in the GDR and the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (die Wende) are selected to question prevailing mainstream interpretations of democratization, to offer competing narratives by which to promote political purposes.

In Poland, the leverage of the science of history is curbed by legislative means. The range of possible interpretations of the Polish involvement in the Holocaust is regulated by the **memory law**, approved in 2018 by PiS-government. Mentioning about Polish guilt in the Holocaust is officially denied and can bring about jail sentence for the historian. This is an efficient means of ruling out undesired agency. Both Polish and Hungarian authorities at the same time are concentrating on taking over liberal or leftist run research institutes and establishing new ones, indicating a pro-active science production project, in other words, implementing a "**parallel truth**" of the past. These institutes are focusing on a) accentuating the anti-communist/anti-leftist arguments; b) proving that these nations were victims of the Second World War and the communist period; c) raising the periods of past greatness; and d) origin myths. These institutions are required to carry out a popularizing task to distribute "new scientific knowledge" for the public and to especially through the school education system.

Also in Germany, there are special publishing houses (such as for example Antaios or Jungeuropa) and a research institute, the Institut für Staatspolitik, that are actively promoting interpretations that challenge the mainstream or liberal histories. We also see something similar in Spain and especially in Italy, particularly since the mid-nineties with the entry of the far right into the government and, even more evidently, after 2022 with the formation of the government led by Giorgia Meloni.

In Slovenia Janez Janša's nationalist party (Slovenska demokratska starnka: Slovene Democratic Party, SDS) established the Study Centre for National Reconciliation (Študijski center za narodno spravo) to shed light on the hitherto "suppressed, undesired or censored historical truths" (by the communist state). Their collection of testimonies of oral history is one of the most recognizable projects. While testimonies themselves do reflect the individual experiences and truths, they are oftentimes edited or led by the interrogator in a way that fits the political revisionist narrative. The same message is transmitted by Pričevalci (Witnesses), a show that airs on national television (RTV Slovenia), authored by Jože Možina.

The "true" interpretation of past events for current political usages is a focal point in extremist narratives in general, but in relation to contested territories and historical traumas is vital. Discussion about debated areas is characteristic, especially in the Eastern European sphere. In this regard, the Hungarian and Polish narratives focus on the consequences of the First and Second World Wars, Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia on the Second World War and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The multi-ethnic composition of most countries also influenced the accentuated role of religion as an identity signifier of ethnic groups. This has a bearing on the post-Yugoslavian war societies in connection not only to historical interpretations and memory studies but also to the perception of minority and migration studies. In addition, the comparison of traumas of injustice provides an extra-leverage for politically anchored interpretations. These are openly challenging the "tainted" leftist academic histories.

Conclusion

There are two main approaches regarding the perception of and the use of science. On the one hand, extremist accounts are **reactive**. They present a critical view of what type of research must be discredited or hindered. These can indirectly target also various counter-arenas and/or counter-media, where these unwanted research results are published or popularized. On the other hand, extremist political forces also invest in **pro-active knowledge production**. They willingly engage in creating parallel "truthful" research that challenges the mainstream or official academic scholarship. This is a post-truth contestation of epistemic authorities.
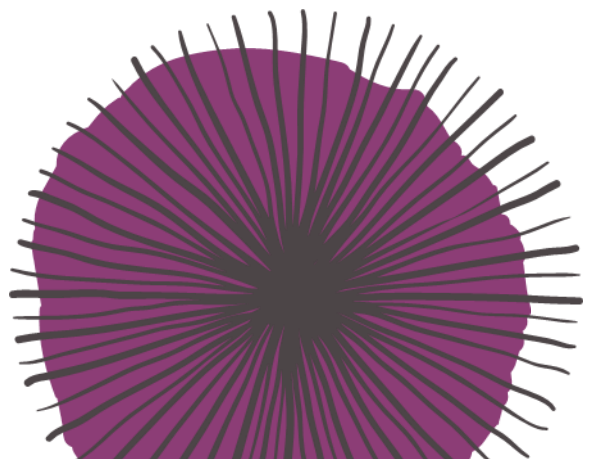
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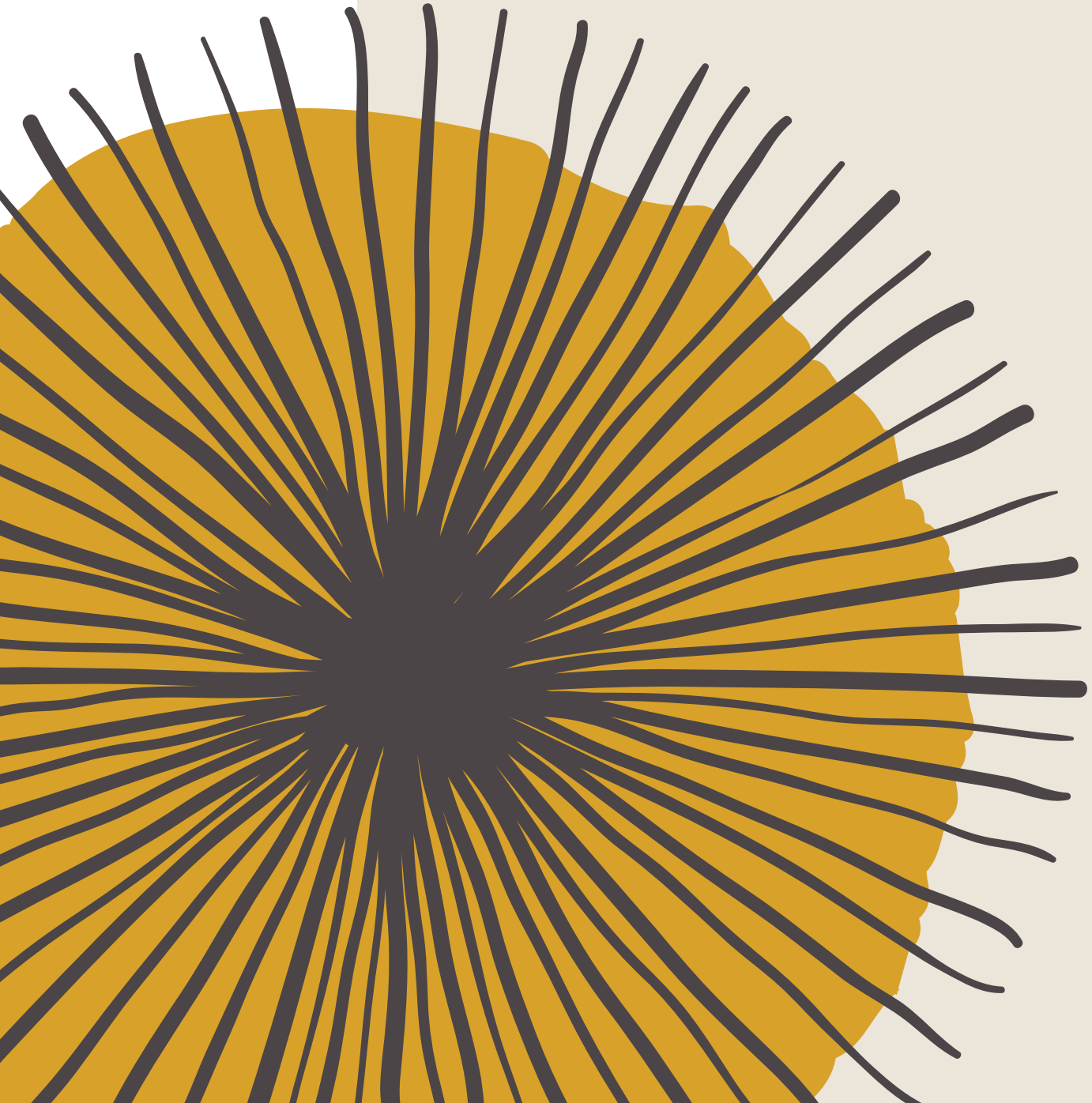
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, below we offer a series of policy recommendations divided into the three sections of our research.

Nation

- Funding and promotion of projects within the education system (from an early age) that promote the values of democracy, diversity, integration, and human rights as unifying elements of Europe.
- Public campaigns in the traditional media and social networks (TikTok, Instagram, etc.) on the importance of the European Union as a synonym for democratic values and freedom. Support influencers who promote the values of integration and democracy to younger audiences.
- Create inter-generational and inter-regional debate spaces (beyond academic spaces) to discuss what democracy means to each generation, whether democracy is currently under threat due to authoritarian tensions and what we can do as ordinary citizens.
- Work at the grassroots level (neighbourhoods, community centres, schools, workplaces, etc.) to offer an alternative to extremist discourses and their narratives based on raw emotions such as fear or insecurity, but also hope.
- Improving historical knowledge of the roots and historical development of extremist narratives to the present day, focusing on why it is important to understand European democratic history: its goals, achievements, but also threats.
- The Commission is recommended to develop a regulation that penalizes and prohibits at the European level any type of

apology or glorification of fascism and Nazism.

Gender

- Educational programs on women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights, abortion rights, reproductive rights and gender-based violence must be protected and financed by EU institutions.
- Social media platforms must be held accountable for the spread of misinformation on gender-related topics such as masculinist content in the manosphere. Moderation efforts must be enhanced by these platforms and monitored.
- The role and responsibility of right-wing media in the coverage of gender-related topics must be acknowledged, for instance in the "trans panic" coverage.
- Support services for access to abortion, for women facing gender-based violence and for LGBTQI+ individuals facing discrimination and violence must protected and enhanced.
- The influence of anti-abortion lobbies must be controlled and combated. More transparency is needed to counter and repress the financing of such lobbies in Europe.
- Better training on gender-based discrimination and violence must be offered to social workers, court personnel and police officers throughout Europe.
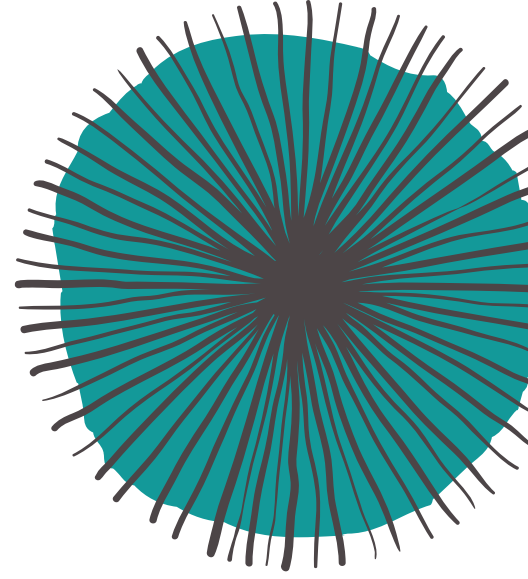
Science

- Scientists must be encouraged by institutional policies and academic requirements, and European and national funding agencies to engage in popularizing scientific results in various arenas and in the media.
- There is a need for institutionalized monitoring on carrying out the responsibility of European academic institutions to stand up and protect publicly their academic staff and their work.
- The Commission is recommended to work out policies and regulations that would monitor and demand corrections, particularly to those historical interpretations that aim to undermine the European values and the basis of the Community. These historical narratives are especially harmful in countries where they enter the educational bloodstream, the compulsory curricula and schoolbooks because these target the ideational infiltration of the next generation of European citizens. In addition, European Culture policy is required to reflect upon TV channels, computer games, and products of popular culture that shape effectively the picture and thus understanding of the past that runs counter to European values.
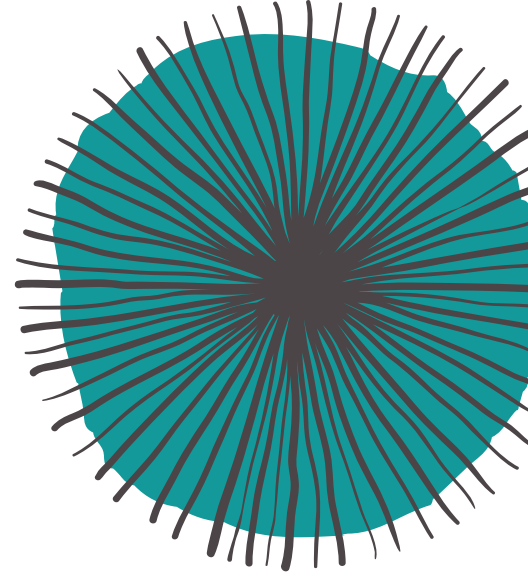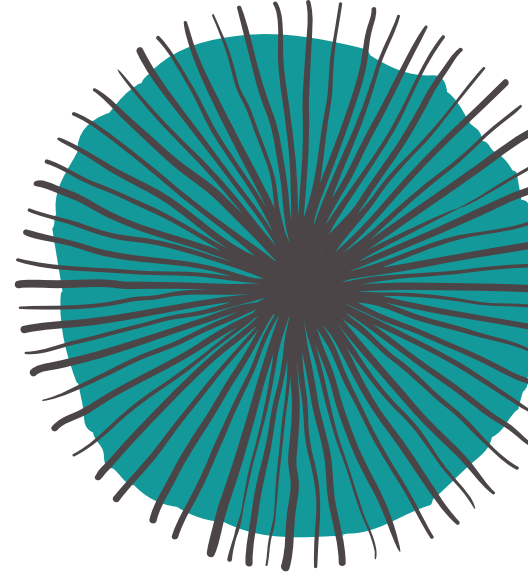
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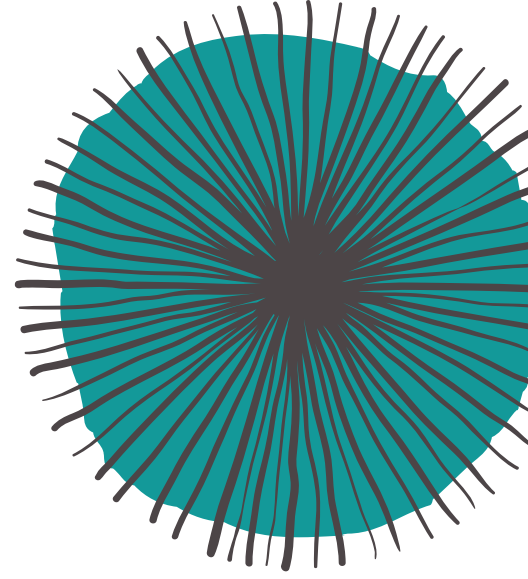
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